The Width Of A Scar

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The Width Of A Scar

by VivantViolence

Summary

With a single shot fired from Jack Crawford's gun, Will Graham has been permanently branded as The Chesapeake Ripper. Betrayed by his friends, abandoned by his colleagues, and left to rot in mental hospital for the criminally insane, his fate is sealed the moment that he meets Dr. Hannibal Lecter; a new psychiatrist brought in by the FBI to finally prove Will's guilt, once and for all, and move on from this public embarrassment.

The only problem?

Hannibal decides that he likes this man who's unwittingly stolen his title. And it's just plain rude for anyone to stand between them.

Prologue

As soon as she's finished smoothing her hand over the bulge of the wire taped on the other side of her lapel, Alana Bloom throws open her car door and is just in time to see the porch light switch on, bathing the first five feet of the walkway in a hazy amber glow.

Shrill howls pierce the air of the otherwise quiet night.

She didn't expect anything less. Will Graham was not a man easily snuck up on, even if his dutiful pack of strays weren't watching the door. Even so, the sour taste of fear coats the back of her throat. For a moment, she imagines Will throwing up the door with a loaded shotgun in his hands and a swarm of dogs much larger and more violent than the ones she knew at his side.

It doesn't happen.

The front door opens, and Will steps out onto the porch, dressed only in a pair of sweatpants. He squints into the darkness, one hand gripping the side of the door to keep any of the dogs from racing out into the night. He sees her coming and visibly relaxes, stepping all the way out onto the porch and carefully closing the door behind him, shutting the dogs in.

Alana's grateful for that. Glad that, whatever happened, they wouldn't get in the way. That they wouldn't get hurt.

"Hey," Will calls, his voice thick with sleep. He rubs at his eyes with his fists. "I didn't know that Dr. Bloom made house calls this late."

"Not usually," Alana's hand trembles as she lifts it to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, but her smile feels convincing. "But I couldn't sleep. Decided to go on a drive… and ended up here."

A lie.

And not a very convincing one, at that. It's already a dangerous thing to do, she knows, trying to play pretend with Will Graham. He can see past any façade and through any disguise. She only hopes that being rudely awaken at this hour after a long day at the office will dull some of the edge that he has over everyone else. Or, at least, that he'll think she's lying to cover up something else. Some other reason why she would have ended up in Wolf Trap.

"Lucky me," Will yawns, dropping his hands from his eyes. He cracks a lazy grin at her, one that makes his eyes shine even in the dark. And Alana isn't sure if that's hatred or despair that makes her heart feel cold. "I don't have much to offer in the way of refreshments. Jack's been working me to death… but, uh, I can make some coffee if you want? Maybe heat up some leftovers?"

"That's okay," Alana says, quickly. Her fingers curl up toward her palms, nails biting into her palm at the thought of accepting food from him. At the idea of watching him move through

his kitchen like nothing was wrong – of him heating it up and serving it to her like it wasn't – like it isn't … "I really shouldn't have even stopped by. I was just thinking about you. Worried, I guess."

"Worried?" Will echoes, slowly folding his arms over his chest. His illusions about this being a pleasant visit slip visibly from his face, resignation taking its place. "I guess Dr. Bloom really is in the house. Listen, I told you that I'd talk to Jack about taking some time off from cases. And I will. Just… after this one."

"I don't think you should wait," Alana unconsciously mimics his stance and then drops her arms again, suddenly terrified that bunching up her coat would draw attention to her unconventional accessory. "What you said to me yesterday… about feeling like the lines are blurring between you and the Ripper. Did you mean that? Do – do you still feel like that?"

Will drops his gaze down to his feet. "You said you could handle me confiding in you."

"And I can," Alana takes a breath to steady herself. Inhales notes of pine from the surrounding trees and the cedar from the wood of his porch. "I just need to understand if I want to be able to help. You've been acting so strange, lately. Getting lost in your head for hours at a time, acting off at crime scenes. I'm worried. Jack is worried. We're all… worried."

"You didn't have to drive all the way out here to tell me that you're worried, Alana. I know you are. But I have this under control."

"You have what under control?"

She takes a step closer against her better judgement.

"Will… what you said to me, yesterday? Was that true?"

"Which part?" Will exhales a laugh through is nose, but it doesn't sound like there's any humour in it. He just sounds bitter and defeated, hands raising defensively when Alana gets closer, as if to ward her off from touching him. "That I think I'm losing my mind? That one minute I'll be looking at photos of a crime scene and the next it's two days later and I'm in the middle of teaching a class, with no idea how I got from where I was to where I am?"

"What you said about the crime scene," Alana prompts, swallowing thickly. Her throat feels like sandpaper; dry and scratchy.

Is this it?

"…I don't know how to explain that." Will says, slumping back against the door. He looks helplessly up at her, hands now lifted as if to surrender. "When I look at a scene from a killer's perspective, I can see it all. I can see it how they had done it. But the last time…the last Ripper kill? It didn't feel like a reconstruction. It felt like a memory."

Alana tries and fails not to gag, exhaling a broken gasp as a sob threatens to shake her chest. To hear it once had been horrifying. Twice, though? It's more than she can bear and it's not

even the confession that they're looking for, yet.

Will hears her distress and immediately pushes away from the door, his gaze meeting hers. Her own misery reflects in the pool of his eyes. His tears are reflexive, and he takes a step toward her.

"Hey, hey…" Will shakes his head, curls bouncing. He even tries to smile at her. "Jeez, 'Lana. Try to look a little less like I'm dying, will you? I'm okay. I think I'm just… seeing too much. Looking too deeply. I promise, okay? After this case, I'll tell Jack that I'm cashing in my vacation days, and I'll get all of this out of my system and start fresh again in two weeks."

He takes a step toward her. He reaches for her, hands moving to touch and to comfort and she thinks about those same hands ripping into people, choking the life from them. All the times that she's called him gentle… every time that she's considered him to be fragile… and this is who and what he really was?

It's too much. She steps back immediately and misjudges her footing, slipping and falling on the porch. It's a harsh and graceless landing and she swears as she scrapes her palms on the impact, sending stinging vibrations through her skin and up her bones.

"Shit!" Will starts to reach down for her, startled. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to freak you out, I just…"

He trails off.

He stares.

Alana looks up, meeting his gaze through the curtain of her hair. And she knows without looking that her coat has fallen open, that the wire is exposed.

"…Are you wearing a wire?" Will asks, not truly believing what he's seeing. "Why would you be - ?"

"I'm sorry, Will." Alana chokes out. "I know what you are. I know who you are. And… you need help."

The night comes alive.

At the word "help", the forest erupts with dozens of uniformed bodies, guns all trained on Will. Alana scrambles to her feet and scurries out of the way, backtracking away from the porch and back to her car and Jack Crawford pops up from the backseat, dropping the radio that he'd been using to listen in on and pulling out his own gun, training it on Will's head.

"Will Graham!" He shouts, voice somehow carrying over the rumble of other voices. "Put your hands on your head and get on your knees."

Will doesn't answer. He's still looking at Alana, eyes wide and pupils blown at the horror of her betrayal.

“Will!” Jack snarls his name out again.

And Alana sees it. That brief second of confusion followed by perfect clarity. And she knows what he’s going to do before he even does it.

“WILL, DON’T- ”

Her scream comes seconds too late. Will dives off the side of his porch, body hitting the ground in a graceless tumble. He rolls and then starts running toward the trees.

Shots ring out. Splinters burst from trees when bullets dig deep into them and birds scream as they take flight from their nests and fling themselves into the sky, wings moving as fast as Will’s legs.

That’s what he looks like, Alana realizes numbly. A wild animal, running for its life under the certainty of death without knowing where the threat is really coming from.

Jack takes aim at Will’s retreating back and fires.

Alana isn’t close enough to see the blood that she knows sprays from the wound when the bullet rips through him. She isn’t close enough to hear his choked cry of pain. But she knows that he falls when she hears Jack take off running. And she knows that she should stay right where she is, but her feet don’t get that memo.

She follows him. Without a gun. Without thinking, all because she needs to know – she must know if this is over before it’s really begun. If Will Graham is dead and if he’s taken all the reasons why he did this with him.

It’s not a long run. Will didn’t get far. He’s managed to roll himself onto his back in the time that it’s taken them to catch up to where he fell, though, and Jack immediately aims a kick at his head to stop him from moving.

Alana’s protest at the brutality never makes it past her lips.

“Try running now!” Jack spits, dropping to his knees and grabbing his handcuffs off his belt. He kicks Will again, forcing him to turn over, and begins to fasten his hands behind his back. “You motherfucker. You didn’t think I’d ever catch you, huh? Thought that you could just join my team? Sneak on in and try to sabotage? Game’s over, you sick son of a bitch.”

Will laughs.

It’s a wet and pained sound, but unmistakable and Alana wants to turn her head away. Can’t bear to watch the mask slip off Will’s face and reveal the monster that’s been hiding underneath all along. But she can’t move, transfixed by what’s unfolding in front of her.

“You’re wrong,” Will chokes out as Jack yanks him up from the ground. There’s blood blooming across his shirt, the wettest stain at his shoulder. He’ll live, Alana realizes, if he doesn’t bleed out. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jack practically spits in Will’s face. “Then why’d you run, Graham?”

“Cause you’re a man with an obsession who wasn’t going to let the Ripper get away if you thought you had him. Because you want his blood so badly you wouldn’t care if he complied, not if he was close enough to take your pound of flesh from,” Will stumbles as Jack pushes him forward. “And if you shot at me on the porch, you could have hit one of my dogs.”

Jack shoves Will again, his expression stony. “Will Graham, you are under arrest on the suspicion of murder. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you do say may be used against you as evidence in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be- ”

Will turns his head as Jack rattles off his rights, twisting to get one last look at Alana. His face, even shadowed by the trees above, is easy to read. Betrayal is etched into his expression as if carved there with a knife.

Alana looks away first and swallows hard. She stays there, just like that, standing next to the pool of Will’s blood with her hands clenched into fists and her eyes stinging with tears.

Is this nightmare over or is it just beginning?

Chapter 2

When we decline,
From the confines of our mind,
Don't waste your time,
On coffins today.

- Empty Walls by Serj Tankian

Hannibal watched as Franklyn first blew his nose into a tissue, then balled it up to wipe the fresh tears from the corners of his eyes before casually dropping the crumpled, fluid-soaked wad onto the side table.

Another sob ripped through the man, and he reached for a fresh tissue to begin the process all over again. Hannibal, to his credit, did not allow his eye to so much as twitch.

“I’m sorry,” Franklyn wailed an apology. Not for his poor manners or hygiene, but for the mess of tears that stream down his face; the immediate response to Hannibal asking, yet again, if he could tell him exactly what it was that he was afraid of. “It’s just so hard, Dr. Lecter. I’m always wondering if people really like me or if it’s all some joke that they’re playing on me.”

“It’s important to you what other people think.”

Franklyn blows his nose loudly, dropping another soiled tissue onto the table. “It is. No one ever chooses me, Dr. Lecter. My parents always loved my brother better. And my brother? Let’s just say that he stole more girlfriends from me than I even had. Just because he could! And – and I got passed over for another promotion at work. Advertising, I’ve told you that I work in advertising?”

“You have.”

“Well, I had this great slogan for this bottled water company. It was, “Choose the water that water would choose.” Catchy, right? Well, apparently not good enough! Cause they went with David’s slogan. Which wasn’t even that clever. And he got the promotion. He’s only been there for two years! I’ve been working for them for ten years! What else do I have to do to get someone to pick me? To see that I’m good enough?”

“Perhaps you are asking the wrong questions,” Hannibal begins to rise from his seat as the clock just behind Franklyn’s seat begins to softly chime, alerting him to the end of their hour. “Self-worth does not come from other people, Franklyn. It comes from within. What do you have to do to choose yourself? I’d like you to think about that, this week, and have an answer for me by your next session.”

“Of course, Dr. Lecter,” Franklyn stands, obediently, and takes his coat from the rack by the door. “You’re so wise, you know? I tell all my friends about you, and they just can’t believe

how cultured you are. I think they'd like you, if they could meet you. And I think you'd like them! You know, I was thinking about hosting a dinner party. Like you do? Maybe you could give me some pointers? During our next session?"

"Perhaps," Hannibal said, his voice equal parts light and noncommittal. "Allow me to walk you to the door."

"Great! I'll bring a notebook. Hey, won't that be funny? I can take notes on my therapist instead of him taking notes on me! You know, I'd be really honoured if you-"

Hannibal pulls open the door, only half-listening to the ramblings spewing from the man's mouth. So focused is he on removing Franklyn from the room that he doesn't notice that there's another man standing in the doorway of the exit, not until he hears his name called.

"Dr. Lecter?" The man says, his eyes instantly trained on Franklyn, who immediately puffs his chest out. Thrilled to have been mistaken for Hannibal.

Hannibal is less pleased. "I hate to be discourteous, but this is a private exit for my patients."

"I'm Special Agent Jack Crawford with the F.B.I," the man introduces himself, clearly unrepentant of his intrusion and pulls a badge from his pocket, flashing it to both Hannibal and Franklyn as if it were a battering ram designed to move them. "May I come in?"

Hannibal can feel the weight of the scalpel in his breast pocket. He wonders if he'll be using it. "You may wait in the waiting room."

It's a dismissal and a warning. One minor lapse of rudeness can be forgiven with the right palette cleanser. A second, however, should be unthinkable. And Hannibal turns his gaze back to Franklyn, who is stares back and forth between the two of them with wide-eyed wonder.

"I will see you next week, Franklyn." Hannibal says, by way of dismissal… then hesitates and flicks his gaze back to Jack Crawford. "Unless, of course, this is about him?"

"Oh, no." Jack smiles broadly. "This is all about you."

(***)

Hannibal does not offer the man a drink.

That courtesy is unearned, he thinks, as he watches the man stroll leisurely through his office. From the *correct* door, this time. His eyes scan over the shelves of books and the statues, but there is no appreciation for the art in the depths of his gaze. Just an understanding of the wealth that it requires to accumulate a collection like this. In this, Jack Crawford has already shown that is no more of a remarkable man than Franklyn. And Hannibal just barely suppresses a sigh. So much for the hope of intellectual stimulation. This conversation – whatever it may be about – won't interest him. He's certain of it.

"May I ask how this is all about me?" Hannibal asks, purely for the sake of politeness.

“You can ask,” Jack Crawford nods. “But I do need to ask you a few questions first. Are you expecting another patient?”

Hannibal gestures smoothly to the empty space around them, his eyes never leaving the agent’s face. “We’re all alone.”

“No secretary?”

Ah, Mabel. A fine young woman who produced adequate work, right up until the moment that Hannibal arrived at the building early and found her sitting at his desk, her dirty shoes propped up on one of his drawings, and a mostly finished bottle of wine still held loosely in her grasp as she snored.

She never woke up.

“Was predisposed to romantic whims. Followed her heart to the United Kingdom; sad to see her go.”

Jack Crawford is only half-listening. His eyes follow the walls, now, trailing over the framed drawings. “Are these yours, doctor?”

These questions serve no purpose that Hannibal can see. If it is to disarm him, then Jack Crawford is not the credit to the FBI that he seems to believe that he is. Still, Hannibal is willing to humour him for a little longer; curious enough to see where this goes.

“Among the firsts,” Hannibal says, directing Jack Crawford’s attention to one in particular. “My boarding school in Paris, when I was a boy.”

“Incredible amount of detail.”

Flattery? Hannibal’s lips twitch even as he selects a pencil from his desk, alongside another scalpel that he had left there. He runs it smoothly across the surface and carves a point, delicately blowing away the shavings to reveal his work.

“Learned very early a scalpel cuts better points than a pencil sharpener.”

He drops the pencil, but not the scalpel. It’s too familiar in his hold to relinquish yet… and his gaze drifts to Jack Crawford’s jugular. The agent has done nothing, yet, but the urge to pierce the skin and feel the warmth of his blood as it pours from him…

It’s a little test of self-control. Indulgence twitching a beckoning finger.

“I understand your drawing got you an internship at John Hopkins.”

The image of Jack’s blood pooling beneath his shoes is momentarily derailed. Such a… casual comment, yet it pierces the air. Whomever this agent is… it’s clear that he’s spoken to someone about Hannibal, already. The only question that remains is why.

“I am beginning to suspect you are investigating me, Agent Crawford.”

Jack finally turns his head to meet Hannibal's gaze, his body language lax. "You were referred to me by Alana Bloom in the psychology department in Georgetown."

Hannibal's fingers loosen their grip on the scalpel. There is no deceit in Jack Crawford's eyes; no indication that he knows anything more than the comments that he's already made. Not an investigation, Hannibal realizes. An attempt to create common ground.

"Alana," Hannibal repeats, allowing a smile to soften his expression and give the illusion that whatever "anxiety" Jack Crawford's presence had created was now slipping away. "I am flattered that Dr. Bloom still thinks so highly of me."

"You mentored her during her residency at John Hopkins?"

"I learned as much from her as she did from me," Hannibal carefully side-steps that attempt at ego padding. "I suspect she has only grown more into her intelligence. It has been a while since we last had the chance to catch up, I'm afraid. Conflicting schedules."

"Of course. I understand that you're a busy man." Jack gives up the pretense of being interested in their surroundings; of caring about the physical presence of Hannibal's achievements. "And I hope you'll excuse me for the intrusion. I have something I would like to discuss with you, and it is both a delicate and time-sensitive matter, so you'll understand if I didn't follow the traditional steps of booking your time."

"You are forgiven," Hannibal begins to gesture to the chair that Franklyn was inhabiting… but then wrinkles his nose with disgust when he realizes the tissues are still there. "I would like to offer you a seat, but if you would allow me one moment to clean up after my patient?"

"Of course. Do you need assistance?"

"Not at all. I wouldn't expect an FBI Agent to trouble himself with the menial task of sanitation." Hannibal walks calmly to a cabinet and pulls out a bottle of disinfectant and a pair of gloves. Pulling them on, he then carefully disposes of the tissues into the waste basket and gives both the table and the chair a quick wipe down.

"It must take a lot of patience to be a therapist," Jack Crawford comments, clearly uncomfortable with the silence. "I don't think I could deal with that on a day-to-day basis."

"I would assume it takes no more patience to be a psychiatrist than it does to be an agent of the FBI," Hannibal removes his gloves and drops them neatly into the waste basket, finally able to gesture to the chair. "Please, take a seat."

Taking his own seat in his usual chair, Hannibal crosses his legs at the ankle and gazes curiously at the agent. "This… delicate and time-sensitive situation. May I ask what it is or is there more that you need to know from me, first?"

Jack smiles and shakes his head. "I only needed to know that we were really alone. Not to suggest that you are a liar, doctor. Just a paranoid FBI agent's old habit. Now, am I correct to assume that have heard of William Graham?"

Now *that* is the first interesting thing that Jack Crawford has said since he arrived on Hannibal's doorstep. "The Chesapeake Ripper? Of course. Forgive me for asking, but is that why your name is so familiar? Are you not the same Jack Crawford who apprehended him?"

Jack no longer looks at Hannibal. Instead, he stares down at his hands and curls them into fists in his lap. As if imagining that night and what violence must have occurred.

Ah, if ever there were a moment when Hannibal wished that he could crack a mind open and see the contents of a memory.

"Yeah," Jack said, finally. "That was me."

"May I offer my congratulations?" Hannibal can taste his own amusement on the back of his tongue, but his words sound sincere. "It is no small feat, you know. Removing such a dangerous criminal from the streets."

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited," Jack mutters, looking back up. There's fury in his eyes and Hannibal thrills in it, for a moment, wondering if he's been found out. If he may be able to use this scalpel yet. "I put the bastard in prison, but it turns out that it's the keeping him in there that's the hard part."

"Really?" Hannibal feigns surprise. "Is there some question of his guilt?"

"No, nothing like that. At least, not as far as I'm concerned. The evidence is all there. He fits the profile that he handed us. But the trial keeps getting held up. First because he had a seizure and they found out that he was sick. Brain inflammation or something."

"Encephalitis?" Hannibal supplied, smiling coolly at Jack's surprise. "I was a surgeon in a past life."

"Of course," Jack nods. "Yeah. Well, as far as I'm concerned that's how we caught him. Being sick made him sloppy. He practically confessed to the whole damn thing, but now his lawyer is insisting that it be omitted because Graham's brain wasn't all the way there. Wasn't a coherent confession or a direct one – just said a kill *felt* like a memory. It won't hold up in court. They're trying to plead insanity. So, we got a therapist on it. Someone to prove if Graham is faking the rest of it. He was pretty damn sure he was about to crack him…"

Jack grits his teeth and trails off, fury contorting his face.

"And then…?" Hannibal supplied, genuine interest sparking in his gut.

"An orderly came forward. Anonymously. Accused Chilton of unethical practices to get Graham to confess. I'm positive that Will has something to do with it. That he either threatened or paid this guy off. Thought it'd be easy enough to cast doubt and even if it wasn't? What's one strike on an otherwise unblemished record?"

"What is it indeed?" Hannibal asks, amused by Jack Crawford's lack of sympathy for this Will Graham or what abuse he may have been subjected to for the sake of a confession that would not come.

“Well, turns out that Chilton isn’t as squeaky clean as we need him to be,” Jack mutters, looking disgusted. “This isn’t the first complaint. The orderly threatened to come forward with more evidence of wrongdoing to other patients if he didn’t back off Will. Lots of them encounter Will, there’s no way to know for sure which one is behind this. Not even Chilton can find out. Our only option is getting a new therapist, and fast. Someone whose record is actually clean.”

“Which brings us to Alana Bloom’s recommendation?”

“She thinks very highly of you, Dr. Lecter,” Jack nods slowly. “And I looked into you before I came here. Not one complaint from anyone. Glowing reviews from past patients. Previous employers practically write love letters. As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing on you that Will Graham can dig up and he has a snowball’s chance in hell of planting something on you that wouldn’t be immediately dismissed.”

“Well, I am certainly flattered.” Hannibal twists his smile into something genial, even as he thinks that there’s little Will Graham wouldn’t give if only someone could find the skeletons in *his* closet. How deliciously ironic… “But surely there are other therapists with clean records. Many of whom work alongside Dr. Chilton. Why not use one of them?”

“It’s not that simple,” Jack’s shoulders slump forward, and he wearily rubs at his eyes. “Will Graham isn’t your average patient.”

“Because he is the Chesapeake Ripper or because of his particular talents of empathy?”

Jack’s eyes dart up to meet Hannibal’s. And he shrugs, unashamed.

“You may think less of me for it, but I must admit to being a reader of TattleCrime. Ms. Lounds is a talented writer, even if her topics are somewhat crass.”

“Right,” Jack growls the word out. “Well, trust me. It’s not as simple as Freddie Lounds makes it out to be. Will Graham doesn’t see what he does in a crime scene because he’s a killer. I’d bet that seeing what he does is what turned him into one. Don’t know enough about his past to make that a guarantee, but I’d eat my own badge if I was wrong.”

“Pure empathy is a very uncommon diagnosis,” Hannibal hums. “But I do fail to see how it might make him difficult.”

“He doesn’t just feel empathy, Dr. Lecter. He’s got a knack for bringing it out in other people. If he didn’t pay off or threaten that orderly, then he created a bleeding heart out of the man.”

“Interesting assessment, considering what he is imprisoned for,” Hannibal purses his lips, pretending to consider Jack’s offer. His *plea.*

He would be lying to suggest that he had no interest, so far, in getting a closer look at this man that the FBI had thought dangerous enough to be *The* Ripper. Would he be flattered to find what it was that the “best minds” of the BAU thought him to be? Or terribly insulted? Judging by the photos of the man’s home that were shamelessly posted to TattleCrime, the latter had seemed more likely.

Either way, he had no interest in calling undue attention to himself. But here Jack Crawford was, holding out the offer of a lifetime. A chance to get close and see just what it was about this man that had the world convinced he was a killer.

What luck.

“If you think me up to this task, then I must accept,” Hannibal says, finally, watching the way that Jack Crawford’s eyes light up. “To aid in keeping such a dangerous criminal where he belongs… well, one could call it a civic duty.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter. The BAU owes you a debt of gratitude,” Jack practically leaps to his feet, as though his joy cannot be contained by mere words alone. “I’d like you to see him as soon as possible, before he can do anymore damage. Tomorrow afternoon, at the latest.”

“I’m afraid I will need at least 48-hours, Agent Crawford.” Hannibal rises as well, content to move at his own pace. Unmoved by the urgency in this man. “I have a strict 24-hour cancellation policy that I adhere to. And, without a secretary, I am afraid that I must contact my patients directly on my own.”

“Dr. Lecter, with all due respect. This is a little more important than cleaning up tissues left behind by a grown man.”

“And with all respect due to you,” Hannibal counters, his smile chilling a bit. “This is non-negotiable. However, I will clear my schedule for the rest of the week, rather than one afternoon. To give as much help as needed. And, from there, I will find a place in my schedule in which to work with Will Graham.”

His tone allows for no arguments. And Jack, seemingly realizing as much, grits his teeth and nods his head.

“Of course. Thank you, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal smiles a little wider. “May I ask if you have plans for dinner, Agent Crawford?”

Chapter 3

Send in your skeletons
Sing as their bones go marching in again
They need you buried deep
The secrets that you keep are ever ready

-The Pretender by Foo Fighters

Everything is green.

Spring is an artist with a quick hand, transforming something desolate into resplendence. Quick, short lines for the pine needles on the trees, thick brush strokes for the soft grass that covers the ground, spongy impressions for the moss that begins to creep over every rock and tree trunk.

It's renewal. It's rebirth. It's the scent of pine in the air that coats his tongue in a taste holy enough to make every plant in Eden wither with jealousy. It's perfect, it's wonderful, it's… home.

Home.

He resists the smile that threatens to turn the corners of his mouth but only so that he can purse his lips together and let a whistle escape through his teeth, listening for the tell-tale sounds of his dogs giving up their fruitless chase of the rabbits that scurry under the brush, here, and return to his side.

"Will?"

He stills at the sound of his name. It's no louder than a sigh carried on the breeze, but no less distinctive than a shout right in his ear. He turns his head in the direction it came from, but his eyes somehow never leave the trees. He doesn't hear the wind anymore. He doesn't hear the chirping birds or the babbling of the nearby river or his dogs. He doesn't hear *anything* except –

"Will."

Will Graham peers past the trees, between the crack of his eyelids, and everything that was green just… melts into grey. The wall, the floor, the bars of his cell. The only colour here is the orange of rust on a sink that only manages to spew out hot, metallic water… and the red

of Matthew Brown's lanyard, the one that keeps his employee badge clear and visible against his chest. That's where Will fixes his gaze because he won't look Matthew – or anyone, really – in the eyes as he stands on the other side of his cell.

Of his *cage*.

"Dr. Graham?" Matthew tried again, jingling the keys on his hips as he uses Will's title, now. There's something… musical in his inflection. He practically sings the words. "Come on back to me now, Doctor."

"Matthew," Will says, stiffly, finally offering an indication that he had heard him. If only to stop him from getting anymore *coaxing* about it.

"There he is," Matthew crows with delight and his keys jingle again. This time because he's pulling them away from his waist, the cord stretching, so that he can unlock the cell door. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Will, but you have a visitor. Hands where I can see them, please."

There's a note of longing hidden under that order. Just a hint of… *something* in Matthew Brown that would love nothing more than for Will to put his hands on him. Even if it is to try to beat him to death.

Will holds his hands out for the cuffs. He tries to ignore the clouds of anticipation that practically bloom from every pore in Matthew's skin as the metal of the cuffs bites into his wrists. Rendering him (less) dangerous than he had been before. And he keeps his eyes closed as Matthew lingers, his fingers wrapping around Will's wrists like a second pair of manacles and his breath hot on his face.

"Where do you go when you disappear like that?" Matthew asks, not yet attempting to pull Will out of his cell. "Do you see them? All the people you've killed?"

Will says nothing. Insisting on his innocence gets him nowhere, in here. It doesn't *move* anyone. Not Chilton, who is determined to have his name published on an article, a book, a *television script* about Will. Not Matthew, who gets a hard on just thinking that he may have found a kindred spirit, someone who tastes blood and thinks it sweet, just like him. And not Jack Crawford, who shows up once a week to demand to know where Miriam Lass's body is.

There is no one who cares if Will is innocent. No one who wants him to be. So, he just waits. Matthew can have the conversation with himself, unhindered by whatever "facts" Will might offer to derail his fantasy.

"I have dreams like that," Matthew continues, his lips practically caressing the shell of Will's ear, keeping his voice low. "But they're never perfect. The blood is always cold. I bet you never have that problem, Dr. Graham. Maybe you can teach me how to do that, some day. How to re-live it."

There's another beat of silence before Matthew realizes that Will isn't going to indulge him in any half-hearted promises of a future outside of this place before Matthew finally starts to half lead and half-drag Will out of his cell. It's partially a show for anyone who might be

passing by, to keep them from suspecting that Mr. Brown might have been the one who blow the whistle on Chilton's methods… and partially a ploy to keep his hands firmly on Will.

Is it a show of dominance? Of devotion? Of care? Will doesn't know. The feelings that Matthew has always get twisted up beneath his obsession with beating people to death with his bare hands. Will would need to take a long, hard look into this man's eyes to truly understand his intentions… but then, why the fuck would he want that?

Seeing is what got him here. It's not going to do anything but make his time spent rotting more hellish. He's barely surviving this by just being Will Graham – taking on a personality like Matthew Brown is only sure to introduce him into a padded cell.

…Assuming Chilton could ever be so kind as to dissuade a patient from potential self-harm.

Will just closes his eyes, trusting Matthew to be one of the few Orderlies who won't attempt to steer him directly into a wall and then aim a kick to the back of his legs in retribution for it. He doesn't really care where he's going to end up, if he's honest. The private room or the secluded cage where there's barely enough room to breathe. It doesn't matter. All roads lead to Rome.

He counts his steps.

He counts his breaths.

He counts the number of times that Matthew squeezes his hold on him, fingers tightening and contracting.

And he doesn't open his eyes again until he hears Matthew's quiet (disappointed) sigh. "Here we are, Dr. Graham."

Matthew opens the door and ushers Will inside, all business now. He directs Will to the chair and then takes his time to lock Will's handcuffs to the desk.

"There we go. Nice and secure," Matthew says, his voice going back to dumbly cheerful now that they're not alone. "Just in case. Don't worry, Dr. Lecter! Dr. Graham is a model patient. Never hurt anyone… in here, anyway."

"I appreciate both the cautionary measures and your certainty in my safety, Mr. Brown."

Will doesn't look up from the table, having already decided that he's uninterested in… whatever this is. The minute that Matthew had addressed the man as "doctor" was the minute that Will tried to reconjure his fantasy of home. Wanted so badly to lose himself in a fantasy that was so real that he could count he leaves on the trees; not sit here and in this dismal room, listening to another psychiatrist try to draw a confession out of him while Chilton listens in through the microphones that re recording every moment of this "private" communication.

"I'll be right outside," Matthew says, cheerful as ever. "If there's trouble, you can call me right in Dr. Graham."

Will says nothing. Just nods stiffly and counts the loops on the chains binding him to the table.

Dr. Lecter doesn't speak until the door shuts behind Matthew. Either unaware of the recording equipment hidden in the room or just trying to give Will the illusion of privacy. It's hard to know which when Will won't (can't) look at him.

"You must command a certain amount of respect, Dr. Graham," the man says, calmly, catching Will off-guard. It's not… how he expected this conversation to begin. "For the orderly to have promised to come to your aid if there is trouble, and not to mine."

Will laughs. He doesn't mean to – he hadn't intended to acknowledge this Dr. Lecter's presence at all. But the way that the doctor sounds almost *offended*...

Well. It's funny.

"Respect?" Will echoes, his voice a harsh rumble in comparison to the soft, accented words of Dr. Lecter. "No. Not at all. It's just that the hospital can't withstand another whistleblower filing a complaint for rough treatment against the patients here. It has nothing to do with me and everything to do with how closely they're being monitored now."

Not strictly true. Not where Matthew is concerned. But the last thing he wants is for any part of himself to be associated with anything that Matthew does. Whatever there is in him that can be believed is innocent would be stripped away the first time that Matthew killed – really killed. Not just fantasies. He hasn't, yet, but he will, and he will be caught – and was put in here right alongside him.

He won't allow for illusions of friendship. Not at the cost of whatever freedom he can still hope for.

"Mr. Brown believes that I may harm you?"

"You're a doctor and this is the privacy room. If there were ever a time to try to beat the answers out of me…" Will shrugs his shoulders. "Orderlies see more than you'd think. I think Matthew is just trying to keep his career in order. Hard to bounce back with a stint at an *abusive* mental hospital on your record."

"Yes, I can imagine so." Dr. Lecter doesn't sound disturbed by the notion of doctors violating their hypocritic oath. But he doesn't sound offended, either. "Forgive me, I believe my curiosity has made me forget my manners. I am Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Do you know why I am here, Dr. Graham?"

"You want my autograph?" Will asks, his tone dripping with boredom. He wants to frustrate this man; wants to irritate him into dropping this conversation early.

"I was asked by Jack Crawford to evaluate you."

"No, you weren't."

Will finally looks up, but not directly at Hannibal. He stares past him, at the wall just behind his head. It's direct enough that he can size the man up; learn the shape of him, without taking on whatever might be in the depths of his gaze.

"You were asked by Jack Crawford to prove that I'm a killer. That's not the same thing as an evaluation."

"That is not necessarily true. Jack Crawford does not care if I believe you are a killer or not," there's not an ounce of shame in Dr. Lecter's voice in response to Will's rebuke of him. "He only wants to know if you are mentally fit to stand trial for the crimes that he believes you have committed."

"That's generous."

Will's hands curl into fists and he forces himself to relax them, again, pressing his palms down flat against the table as if he can somehow transfer all of this shaking, angry energy into the surface of the object instead of leaving it to buzz around inside of him.

"Generous?" Hannibal echoes, when Will doesn't elaborate. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Generous of him to assume that I might be mentally fit and just hiding it. He knew exactly who I was and how I get when he brought me back into the field. He watched me deteriorate. Then he pushed me a little further. And a little further. And then ripped what was left of my life out from under me and sent me here."

"Do you blame Jack Crawford for the murders that you have committed?"

"What murders, Dr. Lecter?" Will glares at the wall beyond his head, wishing that he could burn a hole through the concrete with his gaze alone. Wishing that this tsunami of anger and betrayal that rages inside of him could somehow manifest and help him take control back over his life. "I didn't kill anyone."

"There must be evidence to suggest otherwise," Dr. Lecter's tone is still bland, as if they're discussing the weather. "Why else would the FBI be so convinced that they have found their killer in you?"

"This isn't a very interesting interview, Dr. Lecter," Will leans back in his seat, his expression slowly softening back into feigned boredom. "Are you going to ask me any real questions that you can't already figure out the answers to or should I just call Matthew to take me back to my cell?"

"What makes you think I could possibly know why you would be in here if there was no evidence?"

It's not a denial of understanding. It's a lure; a flash of silver in the water. And Will, for whatever reason, decides to take a bite. Pull on the line a little bit.

“Sorry, I was just assuming that you were intelligent. If that doctorate is honorary, then that’s an egg on my face.”

“You don’t care for eye contact, do you?”

That is not the response that Will was expecting. He was anticipating a more… passionate response. Anger, maybe. Chilton never liked having his ego challenged and the retribution was harsh, but at least ended the session early. That Dr. Lecter switches topics so smoothly, as if the previous topic had never happened at all? Well, it gives Will pause. Thirty seconds of thinking before he can gather himself enough to answer.

“Eyes are distracting. You see too much. You don’t see enough. And it’s hard to focus when you’re thinking ‘those whites are really white’ or ‘they must have hepatitis’, or ‘is that a burst vein?’ So, I try to avoid eyes whenever possible.”

“I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams.” Dr. Lecter muses, and Will stiffens in his seat.

He’s just been read for absolute filth. He knows it. And he has a feeling that Dr. Lecter, in turn, knows that Will is aware. But he’ll be damned if he gives him the satisfaction of seeing it on his face, so he schools his expression.

Before he can respond, however, Dr. Lecter continues.

“When you look through the eyes of a killer, you can see his actions. You can feel the weight of every step he took and feel his blood in your very veins. Tell me, Dr. Graham… when you look into the eyes of a killer, do you cease to exist?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Will answers, the lie slipping from his teeth with more ease than he would have thought he was capable of. He thinks of Matthew, standing out in the hall. Of the horrible, sinking blackness that swallowed him whole the first time that their eyes met. The terror. “I wasn’t put in charge of interviews, Dr. Lecter. I dissected crime scenes, not people.”

“Imagine then, for a moment, that you were faced with a killer. Or even someone you love. Look into their eyes and see them as only you can. Do you disappear from yourself?”

“I fail to see what this has to do with anything.”

“Humour me and then I’ll answer your question.”

“…I don’t fade from existence, Dr. Lecter,” Will says, unwillingly. He shouldn’t answer. He shouldn’t want to. There’s never been anything he’s hated more than people trying to understand him – it’s beyond their capabilities. He knows, from a long life of failure, that he cannot connect with anyone. Cannot be known by them as he can know them. “I am there. But I am hollow. I open myself up and I am filled with who they are. How they feel. I am standing in front of them with their hand reaching through my ribcage from behind me, their fingers on my heart. And they guide me to feel as they do.”

“Look at me now, Will.”

“What?”

“I would like you to meet my gaze. If you think you can.”

It’s a challenge as much as it is a plea. Meant to tempt his ego and temper his anger. He shouldn’t fall for it. But curiosity is a motivator like no other… and he just… slips.

Will finally looks Dr. Lecter in the eyes.

The shade of them is unexpected. A pool of blood that’s been left to linger; deep red. *Maroon*, Will’s mind supplies as he spins the colour wheel in his brain to try and figure out which one encompasses what he’s looking at. Dr. Lecter’s gaze reflects the harsh lighting in this room in pinpoints of red.

And Will feels as though he’s been… recognized.

“You wanted to know what conclusion I could have about the FBI keeping you here, even if there is no evidence of substance to prove your guilt and merely speculation?”

There’s no biting comment for him to make in this moment. Will can only nod.

“If I were to make an educated guess… I believe that Jack Crawford has been personally wronged by the Chesapeake Ripper. And I believe the FBI have been made fools of, by this killer, for a long time. Their need for a pound of flesh may be greater than their need for true justice; they simply want someone to blame and lock away so that they can bury this part of their existence and move on.”

Will breaks eye contact with the doctor, his throat tightening. “Are you saying that because you believe it? Or because you know it’s what I would say if I had answered the question?”

“It is what I believe.”

Will wishes that he could take comfort in that. He really does. But instead of relief, he only feels a second wave of pain. A tightness in his chest that he struggles to breathe through.

“It’s too bad that it doesn’t matter what you believe,” Will finally croaks out. “It might have been nice to have someone on my side. If only for a few minutes.”

“It doesn’t matter to you what I believe, or it doesn’t matter to them?”

“Both. Either.”

“What if I told you that I believe you are innocent?”

Will’s eyes flash back to Hannibal’s face. He doesn’t just look; doesn’t just gaze with the awful fear of seeing. He actively searches; he hungers for the truth behind those words. For moment… just a moment… he lets himself open and devour.

There is no insincerity behind those eyes. No clever ruses dressed up in the pretty words that Will is desperate to hear.

“Why would you say that?” Will’s voice is hardly more than a whisper, his throat aching with the effort to keep from sobbing in relief. Relief that he doesn’t know he can truly trust in, yet.

“Because it is true. Jack Crawford would like me to work aid your prosecution and allow you to disappear with borrowed blood on your hands, if only so that he can sleep at night. But I cannot, in all good conscious, do something that I do not believe in.”

Will feels like a balloon that all the air has been let out of. He sags in his chair, lips opening and closing around words that he can’t form yet.

Finally, he asks. “What do you have to gain by going against the FBI and trying to help clear my name?”

“A better question, Will,” Hannibal straightens his tie. “What do I have to lose by refusing to condemn an innocent man?”

Chapter 4

Shine razor eyes before the walls come down
Wilder than lions, louder than sound
The birds and the bees are getting older now
There's a cold breeze blowing over my soul

- Animal Impulses by IAMX

The scene unfolding before him is even more delicious than Hannibal could have anticipated. Headier than any wine that he had ever sipped, richer than any dessert that he's plated. This man, this moment… it is simply *divine.*

The spark had been there from the moment that Will Graham was shuffled into the room under the covetous touch of a man who anticipated the future position of being a *lover*. But it was a spark of amusement and nothing more. Will Graham was interesting, his animosity a living, breathing thing aside from himself and it hisses and spits in the air like live wire, showering everyone in the vicinity in sparks of his fear and indignation.

What he wouldn't give to find a way to bottle the scent of it in the air. As it is, he breathes it all in, holding the air in his lungs a beat longer than strictly necessary as if to cage the very essence of Will Graham inside of himself.

Every exhale felt like a disservice. To himself and to the beautiful, violent creature just within reach. But still a manageable one. It's flattery, now, to think that the FBI had chosen someone as unique as this to charge with his own crimes. When the spark of interest cooled, he would have no qualms about offering a full assessment of Will Graham's mental health and pushing Jack Crawford to move forward with the trial. Far enough that the humiliation they'd all feel at the next murder would be… poetry.

But then Will Graham looked at him.

And Hannibal forgot himself.

Forgot that his interest was only meant to be passive, a brief look into who the FBI thought could be capable of his craft. Forgot that he was expecting to be amused at best and insulted at worse. When Dr. Graham looks at him, he is SEEING.

And Hannibal very much likes what it feels to be looked at. There is no spark of knowing in Will Graham's eyes (Dr. Graham may be good at seeing, but Hannibal is better at not being found) but there is a sense that there could be. If Hannibal eased his mask down even a little. If he let his eyes reflect the abyss inside of him.

Will Graham *would* see him.

Will Graham *would* know him.

What an intoxicating idea. Charming enough for his fingers to itch with the desire to call the guard back into the room, grab a fistful of his hair, and then slam his head into the table until his brain turned to liquid that dribbled out of his ears. To remove the keys from his belt, free Will, and then make off with him. He revels in the idea for a moment, imagines how Will's skin would feel in his grasp, when they're both slick with blood…

He inhales revelry and exhales the fantasy. Letting it go, at least for the moment. This isn't going according to the plans he had made while discussing Will Graham with Jack Crawford over dinner… but that is only life. Plans can be changed.

Plans *must* be changed, in events like these.

Will leans forward, resting his elbows awkwardly against the table as the chains around his wrists refuse to allow for any comfort at all, and purses his lips into a frown.

"You doubt my sincerity?" Hannibal asks, his gaze drifting down to Will's wrists. He wonders how the boy would look in silk ties instead of these ugly restraints.

"With all due respect, Dr. Lecter…" Will exhales through clenched teeth, the expression on his face practically telegraphing to Hannibal that he's not certain how much respect that would be. "I'm a little too intelligent not to."

"You believe that intelligence is the root of paranoia?"

"No. That uh… that would be experience," Will tilts his head back and turns that perfect gaze to the ceiling, almost making Hannibal resent the space around them that allows him to have so many places to hide his eyes. "For both, really. Do you know how they captured me?"

"Jack Crawford said it was a wiretap gone wrong."

"They sent a friend to my door in the middle of the night. Someone that I had… rather naively believed that I could confide in. I showed her the ugliest parts of my soul with the assurance that there was nothing she couldn't handle. And then she came to try to get me to admit to being a killer. And when she couldn't do that, they just swarmed me. And Jack Crawford shot me ten feet away from my home."

"You ran." It's not a question or an accusation. A simple statement of fact. "And he only hit you in the shoulder."

"Obviously I ran. Jack Crawford will sink his teeth into any flesh that he thinks will taste like the Ripper. He wanted me to refuse to comply. Wanted a reason to take a bite. And I had five dogs on the other side of the door, scratching like hell to try and get through to protect me." Will jerks his head toward the shoulder in question, where the bullet must have hit him. "Jack Crawford is a terrible shot. I wasn't even being particularly evasive beyond trying to get the

hell away from the front door. He wanted something much more damaging. I was right to run. He wouldn't have hit me if I had stood still."

"You risked your life on the off chance that compliance would end the life of a pet?" Hannibal has a hard time keeping the disbelief out of his voice. "That does not sound like psychopathic behaviour. It does not even sound like human nature. Most people would sooner risk the life of an animal than their own."

"If you haven't noticed, Dr. Lecter…" Will leans forward and, for a blissful moment, graces Hannibal with his gaze again. "I'm not most people."

"I believe I have noticed." Hannibal agrees, a faint smile curling the corner of his mouth. "But I am afraid that I fail to see what this has to do with me."

"Alana was my friend. Jack was my boss. And I… trusted them. Maybe not in the same ways, but enough that I worked with them. That I shared with them." Will's lips twitch, anger coming back to life behind his eyes. "And they called me a killer and put a bullet in me."

"You do not trust easily," Hannibal surmises, watching with fascination at the ever-shifting shape of darkness behind Will's eyes. Like clay trying desperately to take the shape of art on its own, without a guiding hand. Misshapen and desperate for a form of its own. "Is it Alana Bloom you are speaking of? The friend who you trusted so completely?"

He stiffens in his seat. "Yes."

"Then, perhaps, it would be in my best interest to inform you that I am here on Alana Bloom's recommendation to Jack. I mentored her when she was a student."

It would be fascinating to see how quickly the walls go up behind Will Graham's gaze were it not so unfortunate to lose the sight of the light and dark that wage war behind it. He leans back in his chair, as far away as he can get from Hannibal, and malice fill the vacant space where hope had been only moments ago.

Will Graham feels so quickly and viscerally that it could almost make Hannibal dizzy.

"Of course, you did," Will snarls out flatly. "And I suppose she was the one who advised you to come at me with as much open honesty as you could muster? So I wouldn't feel the need to meet your gaze and see past whatever game you're trying to play with me?"

"I have not spoken to Alana about you, Will. And you are welcome to meet my gaze now. I have nothing to hide. There is no game. I don't expect you to trust me after one conversation, but I would like you to consider the possibility of being open to the idea of trusting that I am being honest with you. I have every intention of helping you, but I can only do that if you let me."

Will does not meet his gaze this time. It's disappointing, but not unexpected. Hannibal had been curious to know what the knowledge of his preexisting relationship with Alana Bloom would do to him and Will's anger is so beautiful that it is almost worth the loss of that momentary delight that came with hope.

Hannibal can give that back as easily as he takes it away. And he will, many times over. His touch will shape the darkness that is going unattended within him.

But there is work to be done first.

“I am afraid I must be going,” Hannibal rises from his seat, ending the conversation before Will can. Subtly holding onto that power. “It would please me if you would consider what I’ve said, today. I plan on assisting you anyway I can, whether or not you choose to believe me… but it would be more rewarding if you could find it in you to trust me.”

“Rewarding for you or me?” Will asks, his gaze fixed on the table. Hiding his gaze, this time, instead of hiding from Hannibal’s.

“Why not for both of us? If nothing else, I can tell we already have something in common.”

Hannibal smooths his jacket against his abdomen and feels to make sure that his collar is straightened before heading for the door, not elaborating on what that might be.

Waiting, of course, for Will Graham to ask him.

“…What could you possibly have in common with me?”

Will does not disappoint. He takes his time, yes, but the question comes through.

“Friends you can trust are a rare breed, Mr. Graham. But I think we could find that in each other.”

Will scoffs. “I don’t find you that interesting.”

So very rude, this boy. Hannibal can’t help but find it… endearing. His discourtesy is delicious in ways that others would lose their tongue for.

Hannibal smiles. “You will.”

(***)

Jack Crawford is leaning against the driver’s side door of Hannibal’s 2003 Bentley Arnage T, tapping his fingers against the door in a nervous tick.

Hannibal tries very, very hard not to notice the smudges that his actions are leaving against the paint, biting the tip of his tongue and forcing his lips to take the form of a smile, rather than a grimace.

“Dr. Lecter,” Jack greets him, a broad smile on his face. “I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time. I was just in the neighborhood and remembered that you would be seeing Will Graham today. Thought I might pick your brain while it’s still fresh.”

“Brains are always best picked apart while fresh,” Hannibal comes to a halt in front of him, his smile still held carefully in place, even as he registers the lie. It wasn’t likely that Jack had followed him directly here from his home, but it was clear that he had been waiting for a while. “You would prefer an oral report to a written one?”

“I’d take it either way, but the sooner the better,” Jack, mercifully, straightens himself. No longer slouching against Hannibal’s car. “I’m not the only one itching to wrap this thing up. Will Graham has been playing this game for long enough and we’re looking to end it. So, tell me doctor. Do you think you can end this?”

“I do,” Hannibal nods his head. “My conversation with Will Graham was enlightening. I believe that the treatment of his Encephalitis has left him a sane man.”

“Sane enough to stand trial?”

“Yes,” Hannibal nods. “He was coherent. He understood what was being said to him and he responded in kind. I see no reason why he can’t prove his innocence.”

All the blood drains from Jack’s face. It’s only a shame that it doesn’t collect on the ground. Another time, perhaps.

“His innocence?” Jack sputters, staring at Hannibal as if he’s grown another head. “Please tell me that was a joke, Dr. Lecter. And if it is, then know that it wasn’t a very funny one.”

“I do not believe that Will Graham is a killer. Nothing about him fits that sort of profile.”

“Nothing about him?” Jack’s voice raises. “Are you telling me that you had a conversation with Will Graham and came out the other side believing that he’s a well-balanced man?”

“Mental illness is no guarantee of murder, Jack. You would be surprised how many perfectly polite psychopaths you come across daily. People who have never harmed another human being and never will.”

“I’m not talking about just any psychopath, Lecter,” Jack clenches his hands into fists and for a moment, looks as though he might either take a swing at Hannibal or beat his fury down onto his car. Luckily for him, he does neither. “I’m talking THE psychopath. Will Graham said that The Chesapeake Ripper would be unlike any other killer we ever caught; that he would be no one like him. Will Graham fits that profile to a T. The man was stroking his own ego over every crime scene. The only man who looks at a crime scene and sees art is the one who painted the damn picture in the first place.”

It pleases Hannibal beyond measure to hear Will’s thoughts about is work, even through these means. To imagine that Will had looked onto a tableau of his and thought it beautiful…

“Or a man with pure empathy, capable of seeing life through any perspective, regardless of his own values.” Hannibal takes great pleasure in watching the way that Jack’s eyes bug out of his head; in seeing the blood rush back to his face to pool and fester in anger. “Dr. Graham… that’s a title he earned by getting his PHD in psychology, is it not?”

“It is.”

Jack spits the words out through clenched teeth, clearly not knowing or caring what it matters.

“So, he has no surgical skills?”

“The man is builder. A crafter. He fixes his house by hand. He makes his own fishing lures and his own rods to cast them out with. He guts his own fish. He doesn’t need to know how to put people back together if his only goal is to destroy them.”

“Houses are not people. Lures do not bleed. And the anatomy of a fish is much different than that of a human. Are you afraid to consider the possibility that he is innocent?”

“The only thing I’m afraid of is the idea is a guilty man walking free because the only thing he’s better at than murder is manipulating the people around him to look past it.” Jack shakes his head and takes a step closer to Hannibal. Glaring up at him. Trying to intimidate. “Dr. Lecter, I appreciate your time. But, as it stands, I believe I will find someone else to work with Will Graham.”

“Someone who will tell you what you want to hear in spite of the truth?”

If he could, Hannibal would bottle this moment too. The fury that radiates off Jack is not nearly as beautiful as what can be found in Will; there is no killer behind Agent Crawford’s eyes. But Hannibal can only imagine the chemical reaction if he was to release this beast onto the caged beauty inside. What sparks would fly. What blood would spill.

“I am sorry that I cannot put aside my own convictions to cater to yours.” Hannibal continues. “But not as sorry as I am to be unable to convince you that you are making a mistake. I have already offered my services to Will to help build his defense and clear his name. It is a shame that you will not join us.”

“You may be a psychiatrist, Dr. Lecter. But you spend a lot of time in a cozy office,” Jack doesn’t move closer, but he practically spits as he snarls. Increasingly irritated by the way that Hannibal does not defer to him. “You haven’t seen the things that I have. But believe me when I tell you this – I know a killer when I see one.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.” Hannibal pulls his keys from his pocket and unlocks his car door. “But do you know the difference between a killer and his reflection when it shines from Will Graham’s eyes? Of that, I am not so certain. It was a pleasure, Jack, but if you will excuse me? I have some errands to run. Until we next meet.”

Hannibal climbs into his car and smoothly shuts the door, starting the ignition and offering Jack Crawford one last wave before he pulls out of the parking space, his attention already drifting from their conversation and the ripple effect that it will have for him and for Will.

Instead, he looks to the empty seat beside him and wonders just how long it will be before he has Will Graham there.

Chapter 5

Show me what it's for
Make me understand it
'Cause I've been crawling in the dark
Looking for the answer
Is there something more
Than what I've been handed?

- Crawling in the Dark by Hoobastank

Whomever had hired Alana Bloom as a guest lecturer at Quantico desired her sexually, Hannibal thinks to himself as he knocks gently on the propped open door of her borrowed office. The devil is in the details, as they say, and the details of this room spell out intent. The large windows that make up almost the entirety of the outward facing wall offer a beautiful view of the campus and the natural light makes the space feel bigger than it is, even as the sky begins to burn red orange like the dying embers of an untended fire.

Someone in this building had been moved so that Alana could be placed here. There is care in this; a hope that a view will make her stay longer. Give the man who offered her this position more time to woo. It is amusing… and it will work, Hannibal knows, at least to make her stay. He knew enough about Alana to know that she nurses on attention. Steals tastes of it between demure glances in every other direction, if only to see if there's someplace that will offer her more.

He's always enjoyed that about her.

"Hannibal," Alana's expression is one of pleasant surprise… that slips away into something guarded and displeased. It seems that Jack Crawford had already made her aware of his opinions on her referrals. "Come in, please."

"Thank you," Hannibal enters the room carefully, the same way that one might approach an unfamiliar animal. Not for fear of its teeth, no, but to avoid scaring it off too soon. "Normally, I would have called first, but I didn't plan on coming to see you yet. It was an impromptu decision. I hope you can forgive my rudeness."

"You're never rude, Hannibal." Alana's answering smile is kind, but she holds her hands in her lap; lacing and unlacing her fingers in a show of anxiety. "And I'm always glad to see you. Do you want to sit?"

"Please."

Hannibal settles into the Danish-modern chair on the opposite side of the desk and settles his own hands in his lap, politely mirroring her stance.

“Am I correct in assuming that Jack Crawford has already informed you of my assessment of Will Graham?”

Alana purses her lips together, deliberating. Not on what she is going to say to him, but how she intends to say it. “…He did. Probably as you were driving away. Sufficed to say, I don’t think he’ll be calling me in for any referrals in the future.”

“He is a stubborn man,” Hannibal inclines his head in her direction. “He would rather question your taste than his own judgement.”

“He’s not the only one questioning my taste,” Alana smooths her hair back from her face with both hands, now, leaning forward against her desk and shaking her head. “Hannibal… did you really tell him that you think Will Graham is innocent?”

“I did. Because I do.”

“God, he’s good…” She shifts her gaze to the ceiling. Not to avoid his eyes in fear of what she might feel when she investigates them, but because she can’t bring herself to stand firm in her disagreement with him. Unlike Jack Crawford, she wants to believe in Will Graham’s innocence just as much as she doesn’t want it to be real. “Hannibal, you know how much I admire you. How much I respect you. I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for your guidance.”

“I do not believe that is true. You are an intelligent woman, Alana. You would have found your way here, with or without my help.”

Flattery threatens to bring the smile back to her lips, but she resists it for the moment. “And I appreciate your humility, but you can’t deny that you were a huge help. Your teaching meant a lot to me… and I value the friendship we had.”

She wraps her lips around the word “friendship” with subtle dissatisfaction. They both know that she wanted more than a simple friendship with him. That she still does, even now, as if no time had passed between that moment and this one.

“But?” Hannibal prompts, uninterested in dissecting her feelings… this time.

“But.” Alana looks down at the desk now. Still unable to meet his gaze. “Will Graham is not who you think he is. Hiding is what he does best. And from the outside, it seems like he’s just hiding where he’s vulnerable so he can’t get hurt. But I’ve been closer than that and I know what’s really underneath those masks that he wears.”

“I will not pretend to understand Will Graham as you do,” it’s a simple placation, though Hannibal does not like the words coming out of his mouth. To think that anyone knows Will Graham better than he does, even if they have only had one conversation… “I know that he was your friend as well as your colleague. But is it not possible that you are too close to see the truth? That you were so horrified to think that you were fooled by a monster that you refuse to look at him again, even to see if it were true?”

“It is true,” Alana shakes her head at his words and a curtain of hair falls from where it was tucked behind her shoulder, masking half of her face. “I didn’t want it to be. God, I didn’t want to think that Will was capable of anything like that. But facts don’t lie, Hannibal.”

“Facts?” Hannibal questions, tilting his head just so. A show of interest. “Jack Crawford seems to believe that Will Graham fits the very profile that he created for the Ripper. I am not so sure.”

“It’s not about the profile. Will could fit any profile, just by virtue of being able to think like a killer. But this isn’t about that. Not to me.”

“Then what it is about?”

Alana finally looks back up at him, her eyes wet. Her very tears seem to reflect a memory. It’s muddled in her gaze, shapeless forms twisting in her tears. And he wonders, for a moment, if he’d be able to experience it as she did if he only plucked them out of her skull and placed them on his tongue.

“Will told me.”

“He mentioned that he had confided in you about his feelings. I was unaware that he confessed to his crimes directly.”

“It wasn’t in so many words,” Alana’s forehead pinches in frustration. “He had been acting off for weeks. Strange and distant in ways that he hadn’t been before. It took a while for us to notice, I guess, he’s always been a little… different. But he was spiraling out of control. And when he came to me, I was relieved at first. I was glad that he was finally talking to someone, finally admitting that he was in too deep. But you should have heard him.”

“What did he say?”

“There was a crime scene. A couple was murdered in their home. Bisected. Their lower halves were perfectly propped up on the couch next to each other. But their upper halves were in separate rooms.” Alana’s face twists with disgust and horror, now. “The husband’s phone had the number of his mistress on the screen. The wife had a bottle of Xanax in her hands that wasn’t prescribed to her. Will was… weird at the scene. Weirder than usual, I mean. Jack asked for his analysis of the scene. And Will… he just said it was art.”

Of course, he had.

Hannibal can barely resist the fond smile that threatens to break through the barrier of his politely interested expression. He can see the beauty of the scene, even though Alana’s poor explanation of it. The secret lives we lead… though the killer was not Will, and Hannibal was sure of it, the killer did have the great fortune of being *seen* by Will. Of being known in that moment in a way that he would never be again.

If the killer had been in that room, Hannibal is certain he would have fallen to his knees and wept, overwhelmed by the beauty of Will’s knowing gaze. Would have *loved* him. Killed

again, only this time for Will. A tribute. Hannibal knows this because he knows his own urges; his own desires that were born from the presence of Will Graham.

And it is fortunate that the killer was not in that room. Hannibal has no patience for romantic rivals.

“A peculiar choice of words, but not so surprising if he had taken on the perspective of the killer,” Hannibal says, out loud, keeping his private musings in his mind where they belong. Intelligent though Alana is, she had no appreciation for true beauty, and he would not waste it on her. “Hardly a cause for alarm.”

“Maybe not by itself. But he said that and then just… walked away. Stumbled out of the scene and into his car. Didn’t answer anyone who called out after him. Didn’t say anything at all, again, until that evening.”

“When he confided in you?”

“Yes,” Alana whispers, eyes still tearful. “When he confided in me. He came to my office, sat down in that chair, and told me that he thought he was losing his mind. That he… he couldn’t remember having gone to the scene of the crime to analyze it. Just the murder itself. He said it felt like a memory. Like he had done it.”

“Of course,” Hannibal nods. “With all that he sees, it is not surprising that his mind has started to distance him from it. Making it feel like memories rather than another fresh drop of horror into the ocean of all that he has already experienced.”

“He said he enjoyed it.”

Alana’s voice is harsh, and, for the first time, she says something that surprises him.

“He did?”

Alana sags in her chair, bending under the weight of her own words. “Oh, god. I’ve never told anyone else that he said that. Not even Jack. The fact that Will felt like he remembered it, the way he had been acting… that was enough for Jack to want me to wear the wire. I didn’t have to tell him. I didn’t want to tell him. Will didn’t just talk about that murder. He said he enjoyed it. That he remembered enjoying it.”

Beautiful.

Hannibal closes his eyes and lets Alana’s voice fade into the background; her misery could not come close to tasting as sweet as what he sees behind his eyelids.

Will Graham, covered in blood.

Will Graham, blue eyes frosted over with rage, like the ice that children think can hold their weight but only delivers them into a watery grave.

Will Graham, the very image of God himself. Taking pleasure in the pain and suffering of those who are lesser than him – not just a killer, but an artist.

What could titillate Hannibal more? The idea that Will Graham is not only capable of seeing the how and why of what monsters do, but feeling their pleasure as well… or the idea that it was not the echo of emotions that rang through him, but the call of his own darkness, taking pleasure in the idea of becoming?

It is intolerable that he is not here, in this moment. Hannibal can barely swallow his fury at the distance that separates them. And he manages only because the boy is not yet worth his undoing.

“Pure empathy does not have boundaries when feeling the emotions of others. It does skip over what may seem tasteless. It feels and it feels, and it feels regardless of the values of the man, because that is all it can do. Will Graham may need a therapist, yes, but not a cell.”

“What did he say to you?” Alana’s misery is sharper now that the ace up her sleeve didn’t cause Hannibal to fold. “How does he have his hooks so deeply into you already? Hannibal, you of all people should know a monster when you see one.”

To that, Hannibal does smile. “I assure you, Alana. I do.”

If only she knew just how delighted, he was to see the one inside of Will Graham.

“…Just be careful,” Alana says, seeming to realize that they are at an impasse. “Will isn’t who or what he seems to be. And he never will be. Every time you think you’ve gotten past the façade; another layer will be there.”

Mm. Another delightful mental image. Peeling back the layers of Will Graham. Exposing him completely to Hannibal’s gaze.

“I will move forward with caution, Alana. I assure you,” Hannibal says, to placate her. And to move forward with the more pressing matters than Alana’s belief in Will’s guilt. “If it doesn’t offend you to do so, I would like it if you can tell me more about him. About the man you knew… or thought you knew, before this happened.”

“Does any of that really matter?”

Hannibal’s hunger for Will practically sharpens his teeth when he smiles again. “Yes. It does to me.”

(***)

Will only knew that it was morning when he heard the tell-tale sound of Italian leather against linoleum. Without any windows, without a clock, and without any desire to *sleep* when his mind was full of thoughts of Hannibal Lecter and the strange interview they had, the only way to know a new day had come was by way of a visit from Fredrick Chilton himself.

A visit that Will had been both anticipating and dreading in equal measure. He had known from the moment that he heard Matthew call Hannibal "doctor" that this was Chilton's replacement. And the small, petty thing inside of Will that slowly growing larger and sharpening its teeth on every injustice he suffered had been looking forward to Chilton's misery on the subject. Had been ready to *gloat*.

That feeling was gone now. Chilton may know that he had been replaced but he'd also know, by now, that Dr. Lecter had openly and clearly stated that he believed Will was innocent. And there was next to nothing that Chilton wouldn't do to goad Will into behaving in a way that turned that notion right on its head and take it right back away from him; the hope that someone would help him end this endless nightmare.

Will doesn't sit up on his cot and he doesn't open his eyes, feigning either sleep or daydreams in the hope that lying still will deter Chilton in the same way that it might the movement-based vision of a predator.

"Good morning, Mr. Graham!"

Chilton is nothing if not impossible to deter.

"Rise and shine. You don't want to miss breakfast, do you? They say it's the most important meal of the day."

Will doesn't move, but his legs tense of their own accord at the sound of Chilton running his hands across the bars of his cell, the "clink, clink, clink" of his alumni ring (of course he wears it every day, the blowhard) sounding off rhythmically as it encounters each hunk of metal.

"I hear you had a special visitor, Mr. Graham. I'd love to hear all about it. Perhaps over a bowl of cold oatmeal?"

"You're not my therapist anymore, Dr. Chilton."

The words slip out before he can even think about stopping them. Chilton just gets under his skin a way that few others can – apart from maybe Freddie Lounds. And now that the gig is up, Will opens his eyes but stares right past him.

Another act of defiance. Chilton wants to command attention. Wants to inspire obedience. That fact that Will offers him neither never fails to wound his ego.

"Our conversation would, of course, be in a non-official capacity. Out in the open, where anyone could see. As friends."

"You're not my friend, Dr. Chilton."

"I could be," he moves his hand back the other way, now. Clink. Clink. Clink. "You might want a friend in these coming days. Apparently, Agent Crawford is on the warpath. He's just about had it with you and your tendency to *burn* through therapists. Having to fire Dr. Lecter

because he turned out to be suspectable to your manipulations must have really soured his mood."

Will's stomach twists. He knew that Jack was going to find out that Hannibal thought he was innocent. He also knew that there was no way he'd keep sending the doctor in on the FBI's dime if that was the case. But he had, stupidly, hoped that he might get a few more sessions with the new doctor before that happened. That there would be time to figure out how the hell they were going to make anyone else believe that Will hadn't done this.

He should have known better than to hope by now. And though it's not really his fault, Will can't help but mark that down as a strike on Dr. Lecter's ledger. That he had offered salvation and let it down just as quickly.

"Third time's a charm," Will mutters, trying to sound as unbothered as he can manage. Whatever he may be feeling, he's not going to let Chilton take satisfaction in it.

"Perhaps they'll send Dr. Bloom this time," Chilton continues, still looking for a place to stick the knife in and twist it. "If she can be bothered with you."

"Dr. Chilton," Will swings his legs over his cot, setting his feet down on the floor and ignoring the bitter cold. "Have they decided to fire you after all?"

That brings him pause. Chilton looks up at him, startled.

"No, of course not. Why? What have you heard?"

"Nothing," Will says innocently. Too innocently. "It just seemed to me like you must have more free time than usual on your hands, if you're coming to me for friendly conversation. Don't you have other patients? Or are you no longer allowed to be alone with them, either?"

"I was just on my way to begin my workday," Chilton says, his spine still stiff with indignation. "Believe it or not, some of us are of use to society when we work; rather than only benefitting the rest of mankind when we're locked away in a cage."

"You know, I think I've heard that before. Never really bought it though."

Will won't let Chilton get to him. He'll block every attempt at a stab with his teeth until Fredrick is the one who looks broken, and he'll do it because he'll be damned if he lets anyone else step on him the way he let Alana and Jack Crawford.

"Fortunately, no one cares what you believe, what you think, or what you say." Chilton snaps his fingers and points at the space next to him, beckoning Matthew to come out of the shadows with the promised tray of food. "If they did, you might still be roaming the streets. Unchecked."

Chilton yanks the tray from Matthew's hand and pushes it through the slot, holding it still.

"Come and get your food, Mr. Graham. I have a feeling you'll need your strength in these coming days."

Will rises stiffly from the bed, willing to abide by *one* order if it means Chilton will fuck off back to whatever circle of hell he spawned from. But as soon as he reaches for the tray, Chilton lets go of it. It clatters to the floor and spills out. Cold oatmeal washes over his feet and his two diagonal slices of plain toast skitter across the floor. The only thing that goes undamaged is the carton of milk, which lands on its side.

“Mr. Graham,” Dr. Chilton says, not even bothering to hide his malicious amusement. “You won’t move me with a hunger strike. If you don’t want to eat, that’s fine. It’s no skin off my nose. Let’s just hope you aren’t so careless with your lunch, hm?”

Will doesn’t look at him.

He hears Chilton snap his fingers again, beckoning for Matthew a second time. “Mr. Brown, if you would clean this up? Fetch a jacket for Graham, first. I fear his frustration in no longer having access to a therapist he can manipulate may make him violent. Best that we keep him from harming anyone.”

“Of course, Dr. Chilton. I’ll get right on it,” Matthew says, his voice as cheerful as ever.

He doesn’t approach Will’s cell until Chilton walks away, humming to himself all the while. And when he does get close, he whispers to Will.

“I’ll getcha some more toast. You didn’t want that oatmeal, anyway. One of the boys who was put on kitchen duty pissed in the pot after he washed it, dried it like that, then put it away.”

Will doesn’t answer him. But then, he doesn’t need to. Matthew is happy enough with the play-pretend comradery. And anything that would come out his mouth, in this moment, wouldn’t be particularly friendly.

Will may not like Matthew. He may not trust him. But he’s not stupid enough to burn the last bridge he has in this place. Especially not when it looks like he’ll never see the outside of it again.

Chapter 6

Frail, the skin is dry and pale, the pain will never fail
And so we go back to the remedy
Clip the wings that get you high, just leave them where they lie
And tell yourself, "You'll be the death of me"

- Remedy by Seether

Every lamp in Dr. Fredrick Chilton's office is blazing, surrounding him in an uncomplimentary halo of artificial light. It's a spotlight in the crudest sense; a holy glow of Fredrick's certainty in his own importance, just as the stack of books in the corner of his desk, the ones with his name embossed on the spines in gold, are a tribute to himself. Everything in here gleams.

And glares. The reflection of the light against the perfectly polished wood of his desk almost seems capable of setting those very books ablaze. Hannibal even considers offering him a referral to an excellent optometrist… before remembering, with a smile, that he had butchered the man in question nearly ten months ago for behaving inappropriately with female patients. Still smiling, he dismisses the thought and approaches Chilton's desk.

"Fredrick," He intones. "It has been too long."

"It has, hasn't it?" Chilton asks, straightening up in his seat. Holding himself taller, as if it will make himself more impressive. "Ah, but we're both busy men. As you can imagine, a place like the Baltimore State Institute for the Criminally Insane doesn't just run itself. And, ah… I'm sure your private practice sees its fair share of patients."

Hannibal pretends not to hear the intended slight in Chilton's words as he takes a seat on the opposite side of his desk. "I am certainly never bored."

"Ah, Dr. Lecter. As humble as you are charitable," Chilton sits up even straighter as if attempting to cast a shadow over Hannibal. "I hope those patients of yours don't suffer the loss of your attention too deeply while you're gracing us here with it. Because, if I understand correctly, you *are* planning to continue working with Will Graham, despite Agent Crawford dismissing you from his case?"

"It was a mutual parting of the ways," Chilton's attempts to needle him are endlessly fascinating. Hannibal can practically taste the man's inadequacies on his tongue with every off-handed insult. "I could hardly be helpful in condemning Will Graham if I was intent on helping him clear his name."

"Yes, I was made aware of your… beliefs," Chilton's smile becomes sympathetic. A wordless gesture of apology to a deluded mind. "That is why I asked that you join me here, today. As your friend and as a colleague in the noble art of psychoanalysis… I have wonder if your judgement hasn't been compromised. Will Graham is an expert manipulator. Why, I am one

of the few people that he hasn't managed to fool. Why else do you think he's started to make false accusations against me? He knows that he's met his match in me. And he's desperately trying to outwit me. It's a game he won't win, and I do hate to see you taken in by it, Dr. Lecter. You are, after all, a well-known name in psychology."

Fredrick Chilton is not a good liar. Hannibal doesn't need his own talents at being able to read people to know that – it's written on his face, just how much he enjoys the idea that Hannibal will destroy his own career by putting his faith in the wrong patient. The only thing that Fredrick finds sweeter than that is the idea that he will be the one to break the very patient that brings Hannibal's downfall.

"Then you, like Agent Crawford, are certain in Will Graham's guilt?" Hannibal feigns surprise.

"Of course," Chilton puffs out his chest, a broad smile on his lips. "I knew that Will Graham was a dangerous man from the first time we met. His so-called empathy is nothing more than a mask that he wears in order to avoid detection – and to get him invited to his own crime scenes, so that he can revel in them again. I'm surprised he never attempted to end my life. He must have known that I saw right through him. That I knew The Chesapeake Ripper was not the infallible god that he was made out to be, but a broken man so desperate for attention that he would kill for it."

Hannibal's polite smile grows a little cold. "You have thought a lot about this. I am curious… what do you make of the lack of evidence?"

Chilton rolls his eyes and dismisses Hannibal's words from the air with a wave of his hand. "Will Graham has spent most of his life in law enforcement. Clearly, he was using it to perfect his craft. There's no mystery as to how the Ripper has never left any evidence on the bodies if the man behind it knows exactly how evidence is found."

"And his lack of surgical skills?"

"Meaningless," Chilton sniffs. "Clearly, Will Graham invented the idea that the Ripper was a doctor in order to create plausible deniability. A hunter doesn't have to go to medical school in order to create clean cuts. All he needs is practice. Besides, there is insurmountable evidence against him. The confession, for one-"

"Yes, I spoke with Alana Bloom. From what I gathered, Will never directly said that he was the Ripper."

"- the altercation with law enforcement, for another." Chilton continues as though Hannibal hadn't spoken. "He ran when he realized that he had been caught. He might have escaped, too, if he hadn't been shot. You'll also find, with some digging, that there are multiple murders that Will does not have a solid alibi for. Nights where he can't remember where he was or what he was doing when the killing occurred."

"Hardly unusual for a man suffering from extreme encephalitis."

“I know this must be hard to imagine,” Chilton’s false sympathy returns. “To think that someone as simple as Will Graham could be The Ripper. But all that mysticism was invented by a sick mind. He talked himself up because he believed he was a god. It is nothing short of poetic justice that it was an illness of the brain that made him slip up. He was never anything more than a desperate little fool.”

“You’re right,” Hannibal says, thoroughly unamused. “It is hard to imagine.”

“If you want my advice? You should use this scheduled visit with Will Graham to cut off all ties with him. Recant your assertion that he is innocent and keep your reputation in working order. Will Graham has already ruined his own life. Don’t let him destroy yours as well.” Chilton straightens his tie and steals a glance at the clock. “Oh! You must excuse me, Dr. Lecter. I must get going. I have an interview scheduled today with Freddie Lounds.”

“The writer of the TattleCrime blog?” Hannibal questions as he stands and straightens his own tie.

“The very same. She and I are collaborating on a book. A tell-all about our individual experiences with Will Graham, as the only two outsiders who knew something was off with him. If you want, I’ll have a copy sent to you when it’s finished. Free of charge, of course.”

“Very generous of you.”

“Anything for an old friend,” Dr. Chilton steps around his desk. “Enjoy your meeting with Mr. Graham. And think about what I said.”

Hannibal smiles coolly. “Believe me, Fredrick. I won’t forget a word of it.”

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Exhaustion sits heavy in the very bones of Will Graham, weighing him down so completely that he can’t even manage a muffled groan of complaint when Matthew drags him up off his cot and wraps an arm around his shoulders, holding him upright and dragging him out of his cell.

“Just lean into me, Dr. Graham,” Matthew says, sounding a little too pleased that Will is too tired to be autonomous. “I’ll get you where you’re going. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“Where the fuck *am* I going?” Will manages to slur out, cracking open one eye to glare at him. His mouth tastes gritty, his legs are too heavy to use, and he’s got a fucking headache. All he wants to do is catch up on all the sleep that he hasn’t gotten in the last forty-eight hours.

It’s been two days since Will heard or seen Dr. Lecter. Two days since he’d waltzed into his life, proclaimed his innocence, and then walked back out again like it was nothing. And though he knew there could be any number of reasons why the doctor hadn’t returned yet

(interference from Jack, interference from Chilton, personal tragedies, etc) all he could think was that it had all been some cruel joke. A prank just to get his hopes up so that they could break him back down again. It was beginning to feel like there's no low too low for them to sink too and when hope gave out to desperation, exhaustion finally and mercifully offered to swallow him whole.

So, of course that was when Matthew came to bother him.

"You've got a visitor," Matthew doesn't elaborate on who and if Will's legs were working any better, he could kick him for it. "In the private room, so you don't have to worry about standing."

"They certainly know how to treat a patient here," Will mutters darkly, trying to force his eyes to open a little wider, feeling slightly less groggy at the thought of someone coming to see him. Could it be Hannibal? Is it worth hoping for? Or is he just opening himself up for yet another a blow? And one that he can't withstand this time. "I'm starting to feel spoiled."

Matthew's answering laugh is loud in his ear and Will cringes when he feels the orderly nuzzle his nose into his hair. "You're pretty funny. I'm glad you're the one who they're sensationalizing. It's about time that we got rep'd by a killer with a sense of humour."

"I'm not -"

Will's half-hearted protest goes unheard as they reach the private room. Matthew takes up the guise of the gruff orderly again, shoving Will into the room and forcing him down into the chair with two hands on his shoulders… only to soften when he realizes that there's no one else in the room, yet.

"Must be running late," Matthew says, before quickly adding on for the sake of the recording equipment. "Sit tight and don't fucking move a muscle, Graham. I'll still be right outside that door."

Will only offers a disinterested grunt as Matthew connects the cuffs around his hands to the table. Another show of small favours; the jacket that Chilton had ordered he wear had only stuck around for twenty-four hours before Matthew "forgot" to put it back on him. But Matthew still winks at him, despite his lack of enthusiasm, before ducking out the door.

Leaving Will alone. Waiting.

He closes his eyes against the harsh glare of the lights in the private room and occupies his attention by running down the list of possible "visitors" who might be coming to see him. Jack Crawford, for one. It's been nearly two weeks since he last came to question him about Miriam Lass, demanding to know where he disposed of her body and how she found him out. But there was always the possibility of another FBI agent coming to see him. The head of the Bureau, maybe. Trying to offer another plea bargain; assurance that he would stay nice and comfortable in this mental hospital instead of being carted off to a *real* prison, and all he has to do to get that cushy life is plead guilty.

…Maybe it was Alana. The thought makes Will grit his teeth. She was the one who recommended Hannibal, after all. It was a wonder that she hadn't stormed in yet, all self-righteous fury, and demanded to know how he had manipulated her mentor into believing him; how he could do that to her after everything else she's been through because of him already. The idea of her visiting had been sitting over his head like an omen ever since Chilton suggested it and he's not sure what he'll do if it comes to pass. Just shout for Matthew and demand to be taken back to his cell? Refuse to acknowledge her at all? Start shouting at her, this time? Telling her exactly what he thought of her and everything that she had done to put him here?

None of those options feel right. He doesn't know how to reconcile the Alana that he knew and cared about with the one who had betrayed him. Five months had done fuck all to help him process it all. And thinking about it makes him feel so sick that he's relieved when the door opens and pulls him back out of it…

That is, until he sees who just entered the room.

"Hello, Mr. Graham," Freddie Lounds wiggles her fingers at him by way of greeting, her heels clicking against the floor as she heads for the chair on the opposite side of the table and sits, smiling widely at him. "Lovely to see you again. I have to say, that jumpsuit looks striking on you. Just like you were made to wear it."

"What do you want."

Will's exhaustion comes back full force, swirling around him like a riptide and threatening to pull him under. Jack Crawford would have been a delight to see compared Lounds of all people and he doesn't have the patience for this. Not today.

"I was in the neighborhood, and I thought I might grace you with a courtesy call," Freddie says, not put off by his irritation at all. "And offer you one last chance to have your story told in your own words. "**The Hunt for The Ripper"** has been greenlit. Multiple publishers are already bidding for the chance to be the ones who put it out there. Obviously, Dr. Chilton and I are going to be telling our own stories. But I think it's only fair that you get a chapter or two, since you're the only reason this is possible."

"What's wrong, Freddie?" Will asks, closing his eyes again. "Afraid you won't get enough readers without me?"

He can't see the smile slip off her face, but he can hear it in her voice. "I've already practically been guaranteed the top spot on the New York Times' best seller list, already. I'm only offering you a chance to tell your side of the events out of journalistic integrity."

"You'd sell your own mother for lunch money," Will bites out, scoffing at the *idea* of 'Freddie Lounds' and 'integrity' being in the same sentence. "Then you'd write a story about it for views. Don't talk to me about integrity."

"This is the last chance I'm offering. If you won't do it for me and you won't do it for yourself, then think about the families of your victims. They need closure and you can give it to them."

Will's eyes snap open and he shoots forward so fast that the vibrations of his chest hitting the edge of the table sting through his entire body. "I don't have any victims. I didn't kill anyone. I'm innocent. If you want to write my story so damn badly, write about that."

"Let's see… tell-all about a notorious serial killer… or a sad biography about yet another psychopath who claims he's innocent. That's really a tough choice." Freddie taps her finger against her chin, pretending to consider it. There's mirth in her expression, vibrant and unconcealed.

She's pleased to see him here. Over-fucking-joyed. She's never wanted anything more than this; to see him on this side of the table, locked up and away and unable to do anything while she slanders his name and profits off his misery.

For a second, Will sees red. Not just the red of rage. But blood. Her blood, pouring from a knife wound in her throat. Her blood, coating his hands as he straddles her, determined to squeeze what's left of her life from her body; feel her slip away into nothing.

He blinks and the blood vanishes.

Freddie Lounds is still alive and well on the other side of the table. Still gloating, completely undamaged and unaware of the violent fantasy that just passed through Will's mind.

Horrified with himself, Will leans back in his chair. Trying to get away from her as his fingers still itch with the desire to wrap around her throat. He opens his mouth, ready to tell her to leave or to run for her fucking life because the anger he feels in his chest makes him think that he could snap through the chain that's holding him in place, but the door opens before he can get a word out.

For a wild moment, he wonders if Chilton somehow learned to read minds and was coming to catch him in the act of an almost-murder. In the next second, he thinks Matthew must be coming back to take him back to his cell.

But it's not Matthew or Chilton who step inside. It's Dr. Lecter who enters the room and fixes Lounds with a polite but cool gaze.

"Excuse me," Dr. Lecter says, his voice almost painfully polite. "Perhaps you are unaware, but you need to make an appointment to visit with patients here."

"Oh," Freddie rises to her feet, pasting that perfect journalist smile on her face. "I'm so sorry. I was just so desperate to see my brother and I didn't know how to make an appointment, so I -"

"Miss Lounds," Hannibal's voice is practically silk, and he takes a step closer to her, disappointment in his eyes. "You have already entered a room you should not be in, upset a patient, and cut into the time that I am scheduled to be visiting with him. All of that is terribly rude on its own. Surely, you do not want to make it worse by telling lies?"

"Oh, my goodness," Freddie's cheeks turn pink with faux shame and Will could just gag at the sound of it. "I'm so embarrassed. You caught me. I just wanted to spare Mr. Graham's

feelings. He gets so embarrassed when people learn there's going to be a book about him. But you seem to know him. And me." Freddie's smile becomes dazzling. "I'm just sorry that I can't return the pleasure. You are?"

"The one scheduled to visit with Mr. Graham," Hannibal says again, his eyes still cool. "Which I would like to begin. Mr. Brown, if you would be so kind as to remove Miss Lounds? I believe that Fredrick is waiting for her in the main entrance."

"No need," Freddie says, her smile not faltering. "I know my way around. I'll show myself out."

She wiggles her fingers at Will again. He tries very hard not to think of breaking them, terrified that Dr. Lecter will see it on his face and rethink his stance on him being innocent.

"See you later, Will."

"Good day, Ms. Lounds," Dr. Lecter says, answering for Will and shutting the door firmly behind her.

(***)

Hannibal fixes his gaze on the door that he just shut behind Freddie Lounds for approximately thirty seconds, only turning to look again at Will when he is certain that there will be no trace of anything but polite interest when he looks back at him.

"My apologies, Will. Dr. Chilton wished to discuss my appointment with you, and I seem to have allowed him to drone on a bit too long. Please forgive my lateness."

"Dr. Lecter," Will croaks out, his eyes unhesitatingly meeting Hannibal's. Opening himself up to shared feelings if only because it will cement Lecter's presence in the room as being *real* if he can feel it that way. "You came back."

Hannibal wishes he could take those words into his mouth directly from Will's lips. Wishes that he could grasp a fistful of his hair and force his head back, holding him still while his tongue sweeps through his mouth and tastes both the bitter fear of abandonment and the sweet relief of having been found again. He smooths his hands down over his jacket to curb the urge and settles into the chair across from him, drinking in the sight of him.

He looks so… beautifully relived. Not just at Hannibal's swift removal of Miss Lounds – pity she isn't as riveting in person as he finds her articles to be – but that he had returned at all. It's an intoxicating feeling, to have been missed.

"I have." Hannibal says, not bothering to conceal his smile. "Did you not believe I would?"

"…Chilton said that Jack fired you," Will's tongue darts out to wet his chapped lips. "I didn't think you'd even be able to get here again if you wanted to."

“Jack Crawford does not have the capacity to fire me,” Hannibal says, dismissively. “I was not employed by him. I offered my services to evaluate you as a favour to Alana. If he would prefer to get a second opinion from someone who may be more inclined to reinforce his beliefs despite their actual views, then that is his prerogative. It means very little to me.”

“Okay, so he didn’t fire you. But that doesn’t mean he can’t try to stop you from talking to me.”

“He can try.” Hannibal might enjoy that. Seeing Jack Crawford scramble to attempt to keep Will out of his grasp… but only for the pleasure of watching him fail. “At his own peril, of course. I’m sure your lawyer would be thrilled if Agent Crawford was to engage in such an obvious act of justice obstruction.”

“My lawyer is an FBI puppet,” Will mutters, apparently not as moved by that mental image as Hannibal is. “He’s not going to care.”

“Then I suppose the spoils would go to my lawyer.”

Will coughs out a rough laugh. Though there is humour in his expression, the sound itself is pained. As if his throat is both dry and raw. “Lucky them.”

Hannibal does not share in that laugh. His amusement has turned into bitter ashes on his tongue as his gaze sweeps over Will, assessing him properly. What skin is visible seems just as drawn of moisture as his lips; dry and cracked. His eyes are sunken and the skin beneath them is dark as if tears were wiped away with an inky thumb.

“You’re dehydrated,” Hannibal murmurs, tasting quiet fury in the back of his throat.

“Probably.” Will agrees, but there is no care in the words. It’s a simple statement of fact, said with the same regard as stating that the sky is blue. *This is life*, his expression says. *This is the best I can hope for.*

“If you will excuse me,” Hannibal says, stiffly, rising from his chair and taking careful, measured steps to the door. He pushes it open and finds Mr. Brown on guard on the other side. “Mr. Brown, would you be so kind as to have a glass of water brought to the room?”

Matthew Brown’s answering smile is cheery. It doesn’t meet his eyes. “You got it!”

“Thank you.”

Hannibal allows the door to shut again and takes an extra half-second to force his expression back into an approximation of calm before he returns to his seat.

“Back to the topic at hand,” Hannibal inclines his head to Will. “Jack Crawford may take offense to the fact that I believe you are innocent, but in truth he is powerless to stop me from visiting you unless my behaviour causes you harm.”

Will grimaces. The downward pull of his lips causes a crack in the skin to deepen. A bead of blood, glinting like a ruby, pools in the wounded space that it creates. “Jack’s not exactly opposed to cutting corners if it means getting where he wants to be.”

“Perhaps that is true,” Hannibal says, torn between delight and destruction. He doesn’t care for the thought of Jack’s manipulations causing hard to Will… but he can’t deny that it would offer a simple but effective way to come to Will’s rescue. To prove, again, that he is the hero Will needs. Every step that Jack takes in the wrong direction only pushes this beautiful, wonderful, and perfect mind further into his corner. “However, I think that Agent Crawford would have better things to do than meddle in my affairs. And if he does not…? He may find me a formidable opponent.”

“You sound like a Bond villain,” Will says, suddenly. He straightens his back, mirroring Hannibal’s posture and then, in a voice not entirely dissimilar to Hannibal’s, he says, “You should have never meddled in my affairs, Mr. Bond. Now you’ll watch as I kill the only woman you’ve ever loved… in this movie.”

Hannibal stares at him.

Will lets his shoulders slump but raises his eyebrows. “What? You’ve never seen a James Bond movie?”

“I have not,” Hannibal says, uncertain if he likes the comparison.

That bead of blood curves down Will’s chin as he gapes at him in shock. A rivulet of red, staining his skin. Hannibal’s mouth practically waters. It would be so easy to lean forward… to flick out his tongue and *taste*…

The door opens and Matthew steps inside.

He sets the cup of water down in front of Hannibal and, blissfully unaware of the nearness of the beast inside of him, gives a cheerful half wave. “Everything in here okay so far?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answers, leaning back in his chair instead of forward. Mourning the near miss of his lapse in control. It might have sent Will reeling away from him; might have complicated his plans. But it would have also been worth it to have that little taste of him.

“Dr. Graham?” Matthew turns his head away from Hannibal, his attention solely on Will. Checking with him, too… no. Checking only with him. He doesn’t care if Hannibal is alright.

He just wants to know about Will.

“I’m fine,” Will says, avoiding Matthew’s gaze as best he can.

“You’re bleeding,” Matthew says. He reaches out, without asking, and swipes his thumb against Will’s chin, clearing away the smudge of crimson. “There. I’ll see if I can get you any Vaseline, Dr. Graham.”

Will looks at neither of them, now. Drawing in on himself, all the previous humour gone from his expression. He mutters a quiet word that could either be appreciation or anger and stops moving. A perfect statue in his chair, looking at the table without seeing. Matthew seems to take it as the dismissal that it is and heads for the door.

Hannibal watches. He sees Matthew put his thumb to his lips and taste Will Graham's blood as he shuffles out of the room.

Mr. Brown had only been a footnote, before. A nuisance barely registered. But it seemed that he was intent on making himself known, now, as an interloper whose covetous hands were reaching for Will.

There were too many of those here, Hannibal was beginning to realize. This convenient little cage… it had seemed like the perfect way to keep Will isolated. Always available for Hannibal whenever he wanted to see him, always looking forward to those moments of precious human connection. No outside forces to disturb them or pull Will's attention in other directions.

Time was all Hannibal needed. Time to sit across from Will Graham and assure him of his sincerity. To help plan to prove Will's innocence, to stand out as a safe place. An ally to stand beside him no matter who is facing against him.

It was clear to him now that there wasn't nearly as much of that as he thought. Not with Chilton plotting new ways to try and break him. Not with Miss Lounds, lurking in the background and ready to strike at any moment she feels Will is vulnerable enough to slip and admit something to her. And not with Mr. Brown, who dared to take a taste of Will Graham in plain view of Hannibal.

Plans must be changed again.

"We've had quite a few disturbances," Hannibal says, calmly. "Perhaps we should table the discussion of Mr. James Bond and focus on talking through your options. How it is that we'll prove your innocence in court."

Hannibal pushes the cup of water toward Will, who stills in response.

"Uh, I can't really…" He murmurs, tugging against the chains. His hands can't quite reach his face; a preventive measure against self-harm, most likely. And one that Hannibal is happy to pretend to have only just noticed.

"How thoughtless of me," He tsks, rising from his seat and picking up the cup. "Allow me to assist you?"

"Uh…" Will looks up warily at Hannibal. "Promise you won't drown me?"

"I promise."

Hannibal presses the rim of the cup to Will's lips as he tilts his head back, tilting the cup just enough for a small trickle of water to enter Will's mouth. Will swallows awkwardly, seemingly intensely aware of Hannibal's gaze and conviction stabs through Hannibal's heart like a knife.

He's going to get his boy out of here. And soon.

Chapter 7

Show me how to lie, you're getting better all the time
And turning all against the one is an art that's hard to teach
Another clever word sets off an unsuspecting herd
And as you step back into line, a mob jumps to their feet

- You're Gonna Go Far, Kid by The Offspring

Dawn hasn't even peeked over the horizon but there are already several vehicles clustered in front of Will Graham's house by the time that Jack Crawford makes it to the scene. He swears under his breath and slams his foot down so hard on the breaks that his tires *scream* in protest, desperately looking for enough traction on the road to come to a stop as fast as he's demanding. The sound turns several heads, but he registers none of them, yanking the emergency break up and practically ripping his key out of the ignition.

He's not even entirely out of the car before he's shouting at the back of a familiar man in a black jacket with the words "FBI" emblazoned on the back of it.

"Zeller! Get your ass over here."

"Good morning, Agent Crawford," Brian looks for all the world like the kid who's just been ordered to the principal's office, but he's smart enough not to make a break for it. Unlike Jimmy Price, who holds a clipboard up to hide his face and jogs in the opposite direction as fast as he can.

"Cut the bullshit," Jack snarls, in no mood for pleasantries. "What the fuck happened?"

"Police got a call a couple of hours ago. Two fourteen-year-olds who had come to the property to add onto the paint job -" Brian nods his head at the front of Will's house, which was covered from top to bottom in a litany of derogatory graffiti. "- and got the fright of their lives when they found a couple of bodies instead. You, uh… you might want to brace yourself for this one."

Jack turns his gaze away from Zeller, his upper lip curling back over his teeth in a fruitless snarl of frustration. He doesn't want to brace himself for anything – doesn't want to be here, standing on Will Graham's front lawn, with this sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He should be at home and in bed next to his wife, relishing the few peaceful hours in the day that he has with her while even criminals had to sleep.

He swallows those bitter feelings down like a pill that's a little too large. Threatens to choke on it. Then shoves his hands deep into his pockets and stomps across the rain-slick grass to get a look at the display waiting for him not ten feet from where he had put a bullet in his best agent.

There's hardly any face left on either of the victims. The indents of their eyes and mouths are visible, but there's not an inch of skin that isn't mottled with patches of blue, purple, red, and yellow. They had been savagely beaten and Jack could only hope, for their sakes, that it happened post-mortem. But even more disturbing than their state of their faces was the gaping, perfectly circular holes in each of their chests. The long, unkempt grass that had gone wild in Will Graham's absence reaches up through the wound, seeking out the sun without care for the decay around it.

"They were kneeling when we arrived."

Jack doesn't see or hear Beverly approach until she speaks, and he tears his eyes away from the bodies to meet her gaze. But she'd not looking at him; she's looking past him and past the bodies. Seeing something that isn't there or maybe just trying to get as far away from this moment as she can.

"They were pinned into the earth with wooden stakes and both of their hands are bound with wire. Held together like they were praying," Beverly rattles the description off without hesitation, spitting the words out as fast as she can. "They had tealights in their chest cavities. The flames were still burning when we got here."

"Must have been some presentation," Jack says. He pushes his hands deeper into his pockets, trying to fight the cold that's threatening to overwhelm him. The wind that stirs up his hair is pleasantly mild… and taunting, as if Mother Nature herself was trying to remind him that this feeling, this horror… it's coming from inside of him. "But who for? A fanatic, interested in Will Graham's work?"

"Or the actual Ripper, coming to reclaim his title."

Beverly's rebuttal is almost too soft for Jack to hear… but only almost. He whips his head in her direction, his eyes darkening with irritation. "Don't start with me again, Katz."

She turns her head to meet his gaze, her expression hardening. "Look at this, Jack. Are you telling me that this doesn't just *scream* The Ripper?"

"I'm telling you that I want this place on lockdown and I want the entire area gone over with a fine-tooth comb. If whoever brought these bodies here left as so much as a single hair in the forest, I want it found and I want it analyzed. If this is a copycat, then he'll have left something behind. He'll be sloppy."

"And if it isn't?" Beverly asks, her lips still pressed into a tight line.

"It is." He's not having this argument again. Not here, not now. "Unless you can find some substantial evidence that proves otherwise, we will be treating this a copy-cat case. Do you understand?"

"Jack, are you even hearing yourself right now? I can see why you don't want to be wrong, but who is it going to help if we pretend that this isn't-"

“That’s enough. You either get over there and do your job or you go home, and I find someone who will. Got it?”

He can see her weighing the options against each other. Trying to decide if saying what’s burning on the tip of her tongue is worth the walk to the unemployment line. Common sense seems to win out as she nods, stiffly, and starts to stomp back over to where the bodies are lying out against the grass.

That sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach only grows larger. He was out of line, and he knows it, but he can barely hear his conscious over the echoing crack of a gunfire and the sound of pain that came from Will Graham’s mouth before he hit the ground.

This isn’t the Chesapeake Ripper. It can’t be. Will Graham was the Ripper. IS the Ripper. This… whatever this is, it’s something else. A copycat. A fanatic. An Avid reader of TattleCrime, someone who knew the Ripper murders well enough to create something similar.

That’s all this is because that’s all it can be. Anything else is just unthinkable.

(***)

Will Graham wakes with a start, the echoes of his dreams still reverberating in his ears as he struggles to kick the thin blankets off his body with the same desperation that he had tried to fight off his imagined attackers. It’s just as futile an effort in real life as it is in his dreams, though, and he only manages to roll off his cot and slam his shoulder against the stone floor, rolling until he hits his back and then just lies there, in a daze, panting as he stares at the ceiling. And, for the first time in five months, finds himself taking an inordinate amount of comfort in the familiar grey that looms over him.

He’s at the BSHCI. Not lost in the woods under a starless sky, desperately searching for his dogs in the dark as he tries to outrun Jack Crawford. There are no gun shots echoing among the trees and no lingering scent of Alana’s perfume in his nostrils, reminding him with every step that she had helped orchestrate his nightmare.

He sits up slowly, tucking his hand under his chin and tilting his head to the left until he feels a cracking sensation zip down his spine, alleviating some of the pressure. The cots may not be as uncomfortable as the ground…but it’s not much of a step up, either, and he has to repeat the action on the other side before he feels like he’s limber enough to get back up on his feet and stumble over to the sink.

Will twists the only working knob and cups his hands under the stream of hot, metallic water and splashes himself in the face with it, rubbing his fingers into his skin to get rid of the feeling of grit on his skin and in his eyes. It’s been at least a month since he last had that nightmare; thirty days since the idea of being hunted in the woods that he called home was more horrific than the day-to-day of surviving the BSHCI.

He doesn't appreciate its return, even if he figures that its return to his psyche must mean that he really does believe his chances of winning his case are better than nothing with Hannibal on his side.

Will cups his hands under the water again and splashes himself a second time before turning the knob back in the other direction and silencing the spray, padding over to the bars that separate him from the rest of the world and peeking out into the hall.

For once, Matthew isn't there. It must be his day off, but that doesn't tell Will much about how far into this week he is. It's impossible to keep track of time and though Matthew seems to take the same days off, he's never exactly mentioned which ones they are. And the orderly who's taken his place doesn't look like he'd be a sparkling conversationalist, so Will steps back away from the bars again and looks around the small space that he's grown to call home.

There's not much to occupy his attention. His books were a luxury that Chilton was not currently affording him. There's no window to look out, no crafting project to keep his hands busy. And when he drops his gaze down to his feet, he wishes to god that he'd see the familiar frame of Harley, there, politely thumping her tail against the ground as she waits for him to sink down onto the ground next to her so she can lie on his chest and apply pressure until he feels less like he's coming undone.

The emptiness he feels when he thinks, again, that he may never see her or any of his dogs again is… soul-crushing. Overwhelming to the point of making his teeth chatter. He takes three staggering steps backward until the back of his knees hit the edge of the cot and force him to take a seat. There's not enough space for him to rock back and forth, so he shakes his right hand instead. Flapping it back and forth to match the pace of the nervous energy that seems to be carbonating his blood. Making him pop and fizz inside.

It's not as soothing as compression would be. But it gets his breathing back under control and every smack of his thumb into his index finger is a burst of nervous energy being released from his body. The knot in his chest begins to loosen. And he could almost think about lying back down, pulling the blankets up to his chin, and trying to get a little more sleep… except…

"Visiting hours aren't til 'twelve," the guard suddenly croaks out, his voice echoing in the hall. There's a beat of silence before he speaks again. "Oh, sorry ma'am. Go right ahead. Just keep behind the white line, please."

"Of course."

A pair of invisible hands reach inside of Will's chest, grab onto the ends of the knot that had formed there, and pull so tightly that he can't move or breathe. Can only sit still, frozen in time, watching as a familiar face slowly comes into view.

"Will," Alana says, appraising him with a guarded expression on her face. "It's good to see you."

(***)

“Twenty says it’s a copycat.” Zeller says, picking up his Styrofoam cup of coffee and blowing on it, causing ripples to break through the thin layer of film that had formed on its surface. “A fanatic fangirl, to be exact. One of those lonely hearts who writes to prisoners because no one outside of a cage will give her the time of day. I bet she’s trying to prove her looooooove.”

“I’ll see your bet and raise you,” Jimmy plucks the cup from his husband’s hands, taking a gulp and then making a face, promptly handing it back. “Would it kill you to put sugar in anything?”

“It just might. My body is a temple, Jimothy. And it deserves better than that.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Anyway, I’m saying thirty that it’s the *real* Chesapeake Ripper. What do you say, Bev? Care to join in on our wager?”

“I’m don’t need to bet on anything,” Beverly puts her scalpel down next to the stiff on her table and folds her arms over her chest. “I’m the Criss fucking Angel of forensics and I’m telling you right now. There’s nothing here. No fingerprints, no strands of hair. The only skin and blood under their nails are their own. They’re both missing their lungs and their livers. And you know what they had between their praying hands?”

Beverly yanks up the twin articles that she had carefully collected from them.

“Freddie Lounds only posted this twelve hours ago. This is hot off the presses and there’s not a smudge of unknown DNA on it. If this isn’t the Ripper, I’ll eat my own organs for breakfast.”

“Ooh. Pay up now,” Jimmy holds out his hand to Brian, who gives him a little shove.

“Speaking of hands…” He sets his coffee cup back down and casually strolls past the table where the red-haired woman was lying and instead points to the middle table. “What’s up with this extra one?”

Beverly wrinkles her nose as she follows his gaze to the severed hand she had carefully set aside. “Tit for tat, I guess. The killer took her lungs and liver, then cut open her stomach and sewed that up inside. Clearly, neither of our victims are missing their hands, so we’re going to have to rely on fingerprints to figure out who this is.”

“Who doesn’t love a good mystery?” Jimmy asks, looking everywhere except at the hand. “Follow up question… who’s going to tell Jack that we couldn’t find any DNA left behind by the killer? NOSE GOES!”

Jimmy and Brian both practically smack themselves in the face in their rush to tap their noses, earning them a pointed look from Beverly.

“You two really deserve each other,” she says, looking back down at their mystery hand. “I’ll tell him. But not until after we get word back on these prints. The killer didn’t just leave this behind for the sick thrill of it. He wants us to know something.”

There’s nothing greater than the universe’s timing. Beverly’s barely finished her sentence when the computer chimes softly, alerting all three of them to the promise of results. The three of them all exchange glances… and then Beverly practically throws herself forward, racing the two of them to the computer. Brian tries to grab her sleeve to pull her back and Jimmy throws himself on his husband in a mad attempt to climb over him, knocking them both down and leaving Beverly to drop herself down into the chair and feast her eyes on the screen, her gaze traveling over the information there almost faster than she can process it.

And when she does? All she can do is stare at the screen, slack-jawed, as the boys scramble to pick themselves up off of the floor and crowd behind her, craning their necks to get a look.

“…Holy shit.” Brian chokes out.

Yeah. That about sums it up.

(***)

Will’s lips tremble with anger as he stares through the bars and at Alana, his brain almost refusing to comprehend the fact that she’s there. His eyes keep trying to slide off her like melting ice cream from its cone as something in him aches even without meeting her gaze.

After a moment of tense silence, a laugh finally breaks through Will’s teeth. “Did you really just say that?”

Alana drops her gaze down to her feet, having the grace to look embarrassed. “I guess that’s not something you expected to hear from me, given the circumstances. But I meant it.”

“Why are you here?”

There’s nothing in Will that wants to sit here and feel the sour-sweet mix of shame and self-righteous vindication that rolls off Alana in waves. Noting in him that wants to be cornered like this, unable to go anywhere physically or in his mind that’s far enough away from Alana and her mixed emotions and justifications. His own emotions are complicated enough – he doesn’t need to borrow hers when he’s still trying to figure out how to *hate* her on his own.

“Jack asked me come,” Alana says, simply. And Will finds himself almost appreciating her honesty. If she’d lied to him and said that she wanted to be there, he’s not sure he could have held onto his composure. “He wanted someone to check on you.”

“How thoughtful.”

“You were stimming, before, weren’t you?” Alana keeps trying to meet his gaze and Will keeps trying to avoid it, like an ocular game of tag. It makes him a little dizzy, so he just shuts his eyes instead. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do that.”

“Oh, thank god for that,” Will mutters, rubbing his hand against the side of his leg. “If you had, you probably would have told Jack and then the two of you could have conspired to get me to admit that I stim whenever I’m about to get to murderin’.”

“Will,” Alana’s voice is reproachful. “I didn’t mean… there’s nothing wrong with stimming. I just meant that you must be anxious. Do you want to tell me what about?”

“Let me think about that… uh… no. No, I really don’t.” Will scrapes his teeth against his bottom lip, catching the dead skin and carving it off bluntly. Leaving his mouth wet and raw. “Do you want to tell me why you’re asking me stupid questions or are you just going to wait until I’ve said something that you can twist into an admittance of guilt for whatever you’ve think I’ve done now?”

“Will…” Alana’s voice sounds tight. Pained. As if she can’t quite get the words out of her throat. “*I’m* not accusing of you of anything.”

“But somebody is,” Will guesses, sucking his top lip between his teeth to repeat the same action as before. Grounding himself as best as he can. “Why else would you be here?”

There’s so much truth in those words that it reverberates pain between them. Will knows that Alana wouldn’t visit him for the sake of friendship or old times long gone. And Alana knows the same thing, only with the addition of realizing that Will knows it too.

He wishes she would just leave. Turn around and go back the way she came. Maybe march all the way to hell if she’s feeling particularly generous. But he hears the way she inhales, steadying herself, and he knows that whatever she’s here for, she’s in for the long haul.

Will can practically hear it when she opens her mouth, ready to give up the charade and just tell him what it is that he did, this time. But she doesn’t have the chance – her phone rings before the words can get past her teeth.

“…Hang on.”

He hears her pull her phone from her pocket.

“Beverly? Hey, can this wait? I’m in the middle of – what? Are you sure?”

Alana turns her head as Will’s eyes open, curious at the mention of Beverly’s name. She faces all the way away from him, but he can still see her grab onto a lock of her hair and curl it around her finger, a nervous gesture.

“I… uh-huh. Have you talked to Jack? No, I’m not really close enough to… okay. Okay, yeah. Just let me make a phone call really quick and I’ll be on my way.”

“Alana?” Will calls, unable to ignore his burning curiosity.

She doesn't answer him. Her fingers move furiously against her phone and she has it pressed back up against her ear before Will can even begin to guess who she's calling now.

The name that leaves her mouth just about floors him. "Hannibal? Good morning, hi. I didn't wake you up, did I? No, I'm fine. I just… can you come to the BSHCI? No, I won't be here when you get here. I just think you should sit with Will. No, he's fine. Nothing's wrong with him. I can't really explain right now. I'll tell Chilton that you're coming to visit with Will and I'll try to come back as soon as I can. I'll explain things then. Okay? Okay. Thank you."

Will didn't even realize that he had gotten up from his cot until his chest hit the bars of his cell. "Alana?"

She turns but she doesn't look at him. Her gaze is far away, seeing something past him. "Will, I have to go. But Hannibal is one his way and I'll be back later."

"Alana, what the fuck is going on?" Will grabs onto the bars, squeezing so tightly that his knuckles turn white. "Where are you going? What is Beverly supposed to tell Jack?"

"I promise, I'll explain everything later."

She walks away from him as if in a daze and Will lets go of the bars, but only to smack his hands against them, palms open and stinging on contact.

"Alana!"

She doesn't look back at him and Will shoves himself back from the bars, punching uselessly at the air. There's no amount of stimming in the world that's going to alleviate this pressure from his chest and all he can hope for is that Hannibal doesn't live far from this place.

Chapter 8

Will sat on the floor of his cell with closed eyes and parted lips, one hand resting perfectly still in his lap while the other traces imaginary patterns against the concrete; his touch drags squiggly lines against the thin coating of grime and Hannibal delicately bites the tip of his tongue to keep from making any sounds, content to stand back and simply… watch him, for a moment.

It's meditative, for him, the motion of his hand against the floor. If it wasn't for the bruising on his lips in the shape of teeth that had worried over soft skin or the dark circles under his eyes, Hannibal might have even mistaken him for being at peace. But the distress is still there, bubbling under the surface. Soothed by the limited means available to him and Hannibal makes a mental note, in red ink, to gift Alana with a bottle of wine. Something sweet as a token of his appreciation for the *gift* that she has unwittingly left behind for him. Will Graham may be sitting on concrete, but he may as well be surrounded by water – a drowning man, unable to see the shore. Unable to so much as scream for the way that the water threatens to rush into his lungs.

Desperation is the perfume that Will Graham wears. And its scent has only gotten stronger, indicating to Hannibal that Alana had shared nothing of the news with him. No mention of the display that had been left in his front yard. Not so much as a whisper of the rumours that were sure to already be sparking among the BAU. If she had, Will Graham may have turned his head on his own; been able to see the island in the middle of the chaos that promised to be his refuge.

But she hadn't. She had been smart enough (cruel enough) to leave Will in the dark. And now Hannibal could control the tides. Hold out his hand and offer salvation.

And Will Graham would cling to him. Would sooner claw the flesh from Hannibal's bones than willingly let go of him and risk falling back into the water. If Hannibal could bottle this feeling, he would. And he would add a drop to every meal he ever cooked from this moment on; flavour everything he ever put in his mouth with the taste of knowing that the FBI had the only mind feasibly capable of finding him out.

And they had practically gift-wrapped it when they handed it over to him.

"Will?" Hannibal finally allows himself to speak, swallowing back his pleasure and allowing only careful concern to bleed through into his words. "Are you hurt?"

Will's hand stills against the ground and his eyes blink open slowly. Owlishly, lashes beating furiously against his cheeks as if to scrub away the residue of whatever daydream he had retreated into. And the second that it falls away and leaves only the bitter taste of reality, he shoves himself upright and scrambles forward, as close as he can get with the bars between them.

"Dr. Lecter!" Will practically bounces on the balls of his bare feet and that sweet scent of desperation becomes headier. More cloying. "Thank god. What the hell is going on?"

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” Hannibal lies, idly wondering what expression would cross Will’s face when he did learn of the murders. Would it be horror? Vindication? Exhaustion? Every possibility is as pleasant to imagine as the last. “I received a call from Alana earlier this morning. She only asked that I come and see you, here, and would not elaborate on why. I was worried that something had happened to you.”

The last line is only thrown in for the pleasure of seeing how Will’s eyes instinctively move to Hannibal’s, searching for any sign of deceit. As if he could not believe that someone would care about his well-being. And when he finds none, a light dusting of pink brings colour back into his face. He turns his gaze away and Hannibal swipes his tongue against the backs of his teeth, forced to content himself with the knowledge that it would not be long before Will never wanted to look away from his face.

“I’m fine,” Will says, though his expression is not one of a man who is convinced of that fact. “Something happened, just not to me. But maybe about me? I don’t know. Alana just… showed up.”

There’s derision in his voice, venom practically drips off his words and onto the floor. Hannibal must resist a pleased smile; it contents him to know that not everyone is received by Will with the same pleasure that he shows Hannibal.

“I must assume that you do not often receive visits from her. Did she say why she had come to see you?” Hannibal prompts, when Will seems unable to say anything else past the anger.

“Jack wanted her to come, but I don’t know why. She wouldn’t have come directly here if it was supposed to be for therapy, but she was asking me all sorts of pointless questions, like she either wanted to get me to admit to something or to die from irritation.”

“Would you mind telling me what she was asking? Or… would that deliver you to the very edge of death’s doorstep, again?” Hannibal does allow himself to smile, this time. “I would prefer to keep you alive, so we can change the subject if you feel too needled.”

“She thought I seemed anxious and wanted to know why. Don’t get me wrong, I could understand her concern… what man wouldn’t be perfectly at ease in a place like this?”

Will gestures to his painfully bare cell and, clearly still struggling with an overabundance of energy, begins to pace from one side of the room to the other.

“I don’t know. She wanted something. She was… she was looking for something. An answer to a question she wouldn’t ask me directly.” Will continues, before Hannibal can prompt him again. “She was trying to talk to me like we were old friends. As if she was just popping into my classroom between lectures and not standing on the other side of my cell.”

“Perhaps it is easier for her to think of you that way,” Hannibal suggests smoothly. “Her mind may be attempting to shield herself from the horrors of reality. I do not know if she has experienced any doubt since I told her that I believed you to be innocent, but I would be surprised if she hadn’t thought about the possibility that she had sold your life for her thirty pieces of silver, and if that price was worth what she has lost because of it. Her mind may be projecting simpler times; drawing on happier images from the palace of her mind.”

“Maybe I don’t care what’s easier for her,” Will snaps, all teeth again. Hannibal can almost feel them grazing his throat and he delights in it.

“I would never suggest that you should.”

Will falters at Hannibal’s simple answer, coming to a halt and eyeing him warily. A flicker of remorse flashes through his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter.” Will offers, unexpectedly. “I’m being rude, aren’t I?”

“A little, perhaps.” Hannibal shrugs insouciantly. “But these are trying times in your life. You are forgiven.”

“You shouldn’t be so generous.”

Another smile threatens the corner of Hannibal’s mouth. “Would it please you to know that I often am not?”

“A little.”

Will resumes his pacing, but there’s less anger in every step. He walks because there is nothing else that he can do. A drowning man who continues to tread water because the only other option is to let ocean swallow him whole.

“Then you should know that it is true. I often find discourtesy unforgivable.”

Will laughs, but it is a sound without humour. A butterfly taking flight with no colour in its wings, following what its designed to do but with no understanding of beauty. “Then you must really be enjoying our time together, Dr. Lecter.”

“As a matter of a fact, I am.” Hannibal hears the note of challenge in Will’s voice, and he has no qualms rising to accept and dismiss it. “Rudeness is an unforgivable trait in most people. But as you have said before, you are not most people. Discourtesy is your shield, not your sword. You don’t care to inflict it on others as an act of violence, you only seek to hide behind it. The world has been indelicate with you and so you bare the jagged edges of yourself in the hope that you will one day be too sharp to grasp and that they will finally leave you in peace.”

“Don’t.” Will whispers in response, his eyes shutting. “Please don’t psychoanalyze me, Dr. Lecter. You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”

“I’m sorry, Will.” Hannibal says, though he isn’t. “Observing is what we do. I can’t shut mine off anymore than you can shut yours off.”

“I not asking you to shut it off,” Will’s voice is still thick with emotion. Anger, fear, longing… it’s a medley that Hannibal longs to taste on his tongue. “I am just telling you for your own good… don’t look at me when you don’t have to. Don’t try to see me, Dr. Lecter. I mean it when I say that you won’t like what’s there. Nobody ever does.”

“Perhaps now is a good time to tell you that I am not most people either, Will.” Hannibal’s voice is calm but firm, meant to tether Will in place; to stop him from slipping back behind that shield in order to become ungraspable. “And if you do not believe that, then I hope you will at least allow me to make up my own mind about what I do and do not like.”

“The last time I let someone make up their mind, they… how did you put it? Sold my life for thirty pieces of silver?”

“Judas’ name has become synonymous with deceit and betrayal. It is a commonly held belief that he did not deserve the love of his god, nor the compassion that followed. And even if you cannot agree with that then, at the very least, you should believe that he did not know what his god was truly worth when he sold him, or he would have asked for more.”

Will snorts. “How much would you sell me for, Dr. Lecter?”

“You?” Hannibal appraises him calmly. “I don’t believe there’s a man on earth who could give me what you’re worth.”

(***)

Beverly turns her head away from the screen, her eyes burning from the strain of having looked… and looked… and looked… and *looked* at the file that had come up, as though she’d get it to change its answer if she just won the staring contest. It’s an insane little thought… but she takes some small comfort in knowing that her mind is working better than Jack’s, because he looks like he’s ready to grab the monitor and start *throttling* it to try and clear it like an etch a sketch.

“…Okay, elephant in the room.” Zeller claps his hands together. “Miriam Lass, the only FBI agent to ever be in the same room as the Chesapeake Ripper. Disappeared without a trace, no part of her ever found… until now, when her hand shows up in the stomach of a dead girl. What is it supposed to mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Beverly asks, rubbing at her face with both hands. “You don’t need Will here in the room to spell this one out for you, Z. The article in her hands, the *hand* in her stomach. Will Graham is innocent, and the real killer wants us to know it.”

“But why now?” Jimmy asks, scratching the back of his head. “Will’s been in prison for five months. If the Real Ripper didn’t want someone else taking the fall for his crimes, why’d he wait?”

“Will never accepted responsibility for it,” Beverly murmurs, crossing her arms over her chest. She feels… cold, talking about this. The absence of Will feels stronger than it has before. He should be here, talking with them about this. Making the leaps faster than they can process. “He maintained that he was innocent. Maybe the Ripper didn’t care if the FBI fucked up, not until it was about to hit infamy.”

“What do you mean?”

Alana speaks up before Beverly can answer Brian, and Bev just about jumps out of her skin. She’d somehow managed to forget that she was even there; she had been shocked into silence when they told her who the hand belonged to – had just slipped into the chair behind Jimmy’s desk and folded up into herself, so small that she escaped notice.

“They were going to write a book,” Alana says, numbly. Her lips barely move to form the words, like something is choking the life out of her. Guilt, probably. “Dr. Chilton and Freddie Lounds. That’s what her latest article was about – the first tell-all on the market, detailing how the Chesapeake Ripper was finally caught.”

“And how unimpressive he is,” Beverly adds, frowning. “I didn’t read much from what I pried from their hands, but I saw enough. Chilton wasn’t pulling any punches in describing Will – and the Ripper by extension – a virtual nobody who just got lucky. That’d piss anyone off, even if they weren’t a homicidal psychopath. No one likes to be criticized.”

Jack’s head finally turns from the screen. His expression is hard, and his gaze is a million miles away. “This is all speculation. We don’t know for sure that the Ripper is still out there. Graham could have an accomplice. Could have convinced someone to-”

“Sew a handscicle into the stomach of stranger and leave it for the FBI to find?” Beverly interrupts, raising her hands before Jack can get too deep into his rationalizing. “There was a lot of precision and surgical skill involved in this. What are the odds of there being not one perfect psychopath out there, but two? Will always said that this guy would be unlike anyone else and that he works alone.”

“Katz.” Jack grinds out through his teeth, but she refuses to back down this time.

“No.” She raises her hands higher, but it’s not a gesture of surrender. It’s intent. “No, Jack. You can’t do this. You can’t… twist the truth to fit whatever the fuck you want it to look like because you’re afraid to admit that you made a mistake. And if you keep trying…then I swear to God, I will file a complaint. I don’t care if you threaten my job, I don’t care if they let you off with a warning and I have to spend the rest of my life washing dishes.”

“…They won’t let you off,” Zeller adds, unexpectedly. “Cause Jimmy and I will back her, just like we should have been backing Will the whole time. We’ll file complaints too.”

“So will I,” Alana chokes out, her eyes wide and wet with unshed tears but her mouth set into a tight line when she meets Jack’s gaze. “I will tell them everything, no matter what it costs me.”

‘Atta girl, Beverly thinks to herself, even as she watches Jack’s face. Watches the gears turn in his head as he’s presented with this mutiny. Three of his agents and his accomplice, all ready to throw him to the lions.

“Stand down,” Jack says, his voice tight and angry. “None of this leaves this room.”

“I am not going to-” Beverly starts to argue, but Jack waves her down.

“I said none of this leaves this room. Not yet. The Ripper may not be in custody, but… but I think we can get him there, if we play our cards right. And I need all of you on board to do it. If you want to submit a complaint about me, then do it. But not until we have that son of a bitch behind bars where he belongs. You help me get him there and I’ll resign my post on my own.”

Beverly’s jaw about hits the floor. Hers isn’t the only one, everyone else looks just as shocked too, staring at Jack as if he’s lost his mind.

“…Not to sound like I’m not interested in teamwork, but um… how are we supposed to capture the real Ripper?” Brian asks, gesturing around the room. “We’re not exactly the cast of Criminal Minds.”

“You don’t need to be,” Jack grabs his coat off the desk that he had thrown it on. “All you need to do is keep your mouth shut. Will Graham’s innocence is a secret you better keep like your life depends on it, you got me? Keep your mouths shut and leave the capturing to me… and to Will.”

“Will?” Alana’s voice raises an octave. “You don’t think he’s actually going to help you after everything, do you?”

“I think he doesn’t have a choice,” Jack’s voice is gruff and unapologetic. Not an ounce of shame in him and Beverly feels angry all over again. But she doesn’t have the chance to start on him again. “Alana let’s go. We’re heading to the BSHCI. As for the three of you, I want positive IDs on our victims by the time I get back.”

“Uh, the computer doesn’t really work faster under pressure. It just –“

“BY THE TIME I GET BACK,” Jack reiterates, cutting off Jimmy as he ducks out the door in a whirlwind of anger.

(***)

“You can’t possibly be comfortable like that,” Will says, staring incredulously at Hannibal as he moves to sit on the floor, mirroring Will’s position.

It looks so… wrong. Hannibal is too well-dressed, too well-groomed, to well-learned… and just basically too well of everything to be lowering himself to sit on the floor. Especially the one here, where the janitorial staff seemed to have missed the memo about the existence of mops.

“Nor can you,” Hannibal counters, calmly. To his credit, he doesn’t let any discomfort show in his face. He’s got the same expression now that Will imagines he would have if he was lounging in a leather armchair. Perfectly content. “However, I believe we can both endure.”

Will doesn’t like that, either. “You shouldn’t have to.”

“Should you?”

Clearly, Hannibal isn’t interested in taking on any of Will’s sympathy. Every well-meaning comment rolls off of his back with a shrug of his shoulders and brings them to the same conclusion – Hannibal does what he wants, despite whatever Will thinks. It’s a circle that Will doesn’t think he wants to waste his time dancing around, so he just sighs and gives it up.

“You must be a good therapist,” Will says, instead. “Willing to lower yourself out of your comfort zone to meet them on their level.”

There’s a spark of interest in Hannibal’s eyes when Will says this and it’s one that he’s starting to grow familiar with. The seemingly endless fascination that Hannibal has with his thoughts is so sincere that Will forgets to stop and question it, but not so much that he doesn’t notice its arrival.

“Do you believe that I consider my patients and their needs to be beneath me?

Will hesitates. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I am not offended.”

It’s meant to be reassuring, but Will only shakes his head. The silent ‘yet’ on the back end of that statement is louder than the words themselves and he swallows thickly.

“Not yet,” he says, bringing the words to life instead of just letting them rattle around in his brain. It’s more manageable that way. “But you will be. Would be. No one likes me when I’m psychoanalyzed, but they like me even less when I’m the one who’s doing the analysis. I see what I see, and I say what I see. I don’t soften it, I don’t lie. It’s not a game or a magic trick. And I have yet to look at someone who didn’t want to rip my eyes out afterward.”

He pauses, licking his lips, then smiles a little sadly.

“You’re my only ally, Dr. Lecter. I get too close, and I lose that. Let’s just… keep it professional.”

“Or we could socialize like adults, god forbid we become friendly.”

Will averts his gaze. “I don’t have friends, Dr. Lecter.”

“What a delightful coincidence,” Hannibal says. His voice is smooth and, surprisingly, doesn’t sound pitying. “Neither do I.”

Will scoffs. “Now you’re just mocking me.”

“Am I?”

There’s such a… gentle sincerity in Hannibal’s tone that it draws Will’s gaze back to him, despite everything in him telling him that it’s a bad idea. He just… he *wants*. He wants to look and know if it’s true. Wants to open himself up and feel what Hannibal does, if only because it’s a soothing balm in comparison to feeling what he does on his own.

And when he does look, he can't feel any agenda. Any hidden intentions. Hannibal looks as sincere as he sounds and the words that Will comes up with in a last-ditch effort to prove his pessimism correct are forced.

"Come on," Will says, sighing through his nose. "Are you going to tell me that *you* have trouble socializing?"

"Not at all," Hannibal doesn't so much as blink at the question. "In fact, I am quite active in many social circles. I attend the opera, I host dinner parties, and I have been known to fund events in the community. I am well liked, but that is not the same as having friends."

Will starts to speak without meaning to. Without even really hearing himself. It's the force of Hannibal's gaze; the sincerity and the underlying loneliness. It seeps into him and he just… overflows.

"You're respected and feared in equal measure and it's a reputation well earned. Your education and your insistence on the value of manners means that you don't suffer fools, and your knowledge of the arts and your wealth mean that when someone falls out of your favour, they're shunned completely by everyone else too, as if bad manners are catching. But really, it's because they value your money too much to risk losing it over something as silly as loyalty to a lifelong friend. If asked, they would say that they just value your friendship more, but that's not true."

Will pauses to take a deep breath, but the words don't stop. He's more Hannibal than he is himself, now, and the feeling corrects his posture; straightens his spine and angles his head to look back at Dr. Lecter like his own reflection.

"Not that you would ever ask. You're too clever to trust them and you don't care what they really think about you. All you want from them is what they fall over themselves to give you: flattery. You like having your ego stroked. They practically grovel at your feet, and it amuses you because you do see yourself as being above them and above most other people, too. But it's not a malicious thought. It's just a fact. You can stand in a room full of people and not see any of them. You don't have friends because you don't want them. No one interests you enough for you to care about the details of their lives apart from the bits you need to get through passing polite conversations."

"More, Will." Hannibal's somehow gotten closer to the bars. Will hadn't even seen him move, but the distance between them has gotten significantly shorter. "Tell me more."

"You're lonely," Will whispers. It washes through him like a tidal wave, ripping through everything that he is on his own and replacing it with even more of Hannibal. "You know you're better than they are and you're willing to lower yourself, sometimes, when you're feeling bored or curious. But you'd rather have someone worthy of climbing up to meet you where you are. To look past the façade and see you for who you really are."

"More." Hannibal says again, quietly urging.

Will's lips tremble. "You've been loved, before, but you've only ever loved one person in return, and you lost them a long time ago. They weren't your equal – you've never met

anyone you think is your match. But you held them in high esteem. They were the only thing you ever loved more than yourself. And you want that feeling again. There's no replacing what you lost, but you need something similar. An equal. A partner. You want something you can love, and I think you'd kill for it if you had the chance."

Hannibal's smile is radiant, and he opens his mouth to say something; maybe to ask Will to keep digging, to tell him more. Or maybe to praise him for what he's already found… but the words never reach Will because another voice speaks first.

"Dr. Lecter?"

Will jerks backward, the delicate thread of connection that tethered him to Hannibal severed by the sound of Jack Crawford's voice. Will hadn't even realized that he had started crying until he moved his hands to his face, scrubbing fiercely at his cheeks with his palms and twisting on the floor, turning away so that he doesn't accidentally see Jack while he's still so open.

He hears Hannibal get to his feet, his composure probably slipping back with more ease than Will's. "Good afternoon Agent Crawford. What a pleasant surprise."

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you while you're working with a patient," Jack says, and Will presses his hands a little harder over his eyes.

"Not at all. I was merely having a conversation with a friend."

Friend.

The word is not a slip of the tongue or a mistake, not after the conversation they had just had. It's meaningful and pointed; Hannibal wants him to hear it. And, somehow, that stabilizes Will faster than anything else ever has. He drops his hands from his eyes and rises to his feet.

He doesn't look at either of them, though. Still too raw inside to risk a possible overload if he looks again.

"Jack," He grits stiffly. "I didn't realize I was scheduled for another interrogation today."

"Dr. Lecter," Jack doesn't address Will at all, and it makes him seethe inside. "Would you be amicable to the idea of you and Will joining Dr. Bloom and I in the privacy room? There are some things that I would like to discuss."

"If Will is agreeable to the idea, I would have no problem joining to support him." The rustle of fabric tells Will that Hannibal has turned to look at him. "Will?"

Warmth settles into the pit of Will's stomach, not missing the pointed way that Hannibal brings him back into the conversation anymore than he had missed the word "friend".

"You'll come with me?" Will asks, unable to resist the urge to needle Jack. Just a little. "The last time I was alone with them, there was a bullet in my shoulder."

“I will accompany you,” Hannibal says, again. “And, if need be, shield you from any stray bullets.”

Jack forces a laugh. “I assure you, that won’t be necessary. Why don’t I go and fetch a guard to help Dr. Graham out of his cell and then the three of us can join Dr. Bloom.”

“Sounds lovely.”

Will doesn’t look up until Jack’s footsteps grow faint. And when he does, he finds Hannibal has slipped back behind polite, plastic mask that he had been wearing before he invited Will to see him. Whatever he was going to say to Will is lost, for the moment, and something petty inside of him adds that to the list of sins that Jack Crawford has committed.

“I didn’t even realize the guard left,” Will murmurs, since he can think of nothing else to say. Not in the wake of the intimate moment they had shared.

“I asked him to,” Hannibal says, casually.

“And he just… went?”

Hannibal shrugs, the picture of insouciance. “I can be very persuasive. I did not know what state I would find you in and, if you were compromised, I did not want to invite you to be vulnerable unless I was in control of all the elements in the room. A strange body would have been a variable that I couldn’t be certain of, and I would not risk your trust.”

He wrinkles his nose. “I thought I wasn’t your patient.”

“Of course not,” the ghost of Hannibal’s earlier smile graces his lips. “I can offer a patient an hour of safety in a controlled environment, and I can make suggestions on how they might better their life. But I cannot reach beyond that to protect them. They must do it on their own. But you are a friend and I find that I treasure your company too much to take such a passive role.”

Will’s face grows hot, and he tries, in vain, to conceal it behind a joke. “Even if it means taking a bullet for me?”

Dr. Lecter's voice is a little too serious for Will's tastes when he responds. “Especially if it means that.”

Chapter 9

You gotta feel courage
Embrace possession
If it was easier to shatter everything that ever mattered
But it's not, because it's your obsession

- Cut the Cord by Shinedown

The scene is set, and the curtain has only just risen… and yet, there's something strangely hollow about this performance already, Hannibal thinks to himself as he surveys the scene before him from his place to the right of where Will is seated opposite both Jack and Alana. For all his curiosity about the situation, Will had taken one look in Alana's direction and retreated behind his internal shield, his shoulders stiff and his gaze intent on the surface of the table as if it held the answers he was looking for.

Tension is thick in the air, and it sours the silence between both sides of the room. No one at the table seems willing to be the first to crack under the weight of it and so Hannibal, from his place as the spectator, speaks.

"This situation must be quite delicate," he says, leaning forward so that he can brush his fingers against the tangled mass of wires that lay on the corner of the table. They were ripped from their hiding place with no finesse; just burning intent. "If Dr. Chilton has been excluded from this conversation."

"Everyone is excluded from this conversation," Agent Crawford says. And though Hannibal's observation seems to have loosened his tongue, his shoulders only rise higher as the tension he seems to be feeling continues to build. "We're operating at the highest level of discretion. What is said in this room cannot be repeated outside of it. Can I trust that you'll be discreet, Dr. Lecter, or will I have to ask you to wait outside?"

Hannibal smiles thinly, contenting himself with imagining the sound that Jack Crawford's head would make against the corner of the table if he tried to wrest him from Will's side.

"There is a certain amount of discretion required to be a psychologist. Rest assured, I can keep a secret when I feel that it is necessary."

"Then I suggest you find the necessity in this situation and find it fast," Jack growls, clearly off put by the fact that Hannibal hadn't outright agreed but unwilling to engage in a direct battle of wills against him yet. "Graham?"

Will's head twitches when he's addressed. Fighting the instinct to look up at the sound of his name. "This is a hospital for the criminally insane. I could walk out there and start screaming that we just witnessed the second coming of Jesus and no one is going to bat an eye."

“Will.” Jack tries again, refusing to accept a non-answer from Will as easily as he took it from Hannibal. “Please.”

“I’m not promising anything to you. You talk, I’ll decide.”

“…Fine.”

Agent Crawford picks up his briefcase and sets it down against the table with a little more force than necessary. He pops open the latch and reaches inside, grabbing a manilla folder and setting it down in front of Will, who immediately complains.

“Why do people keep trying to hand me things?”

“Simple courtesy,” Hannibal answers, even knowing it is a rhetorical question. He wants to remind Will that he’s there – that he isn’t alone in this moment. He begins to reach for the folder but pauses just as his fingers brush the surface of it. “If I may?”

“Of course,” Jack says, but it wasn’t his permission that Hannibal had been looking for.

Will doesn’t acknowledge the question at first, his eyes closed and a muscle thumping in his jaw, indicating that he’s gritting his teeth to the point of causing himself pain.

“Will?” Hannibal questions, softly, making no move to open the folder yet.

Another minute passes before Will finally nods stiffly. And Hannibal makes quick work of it, opening the folder and carefully laying out its contents – photos, as he had known they would be – so that Will could see them with ease if he wanted to.

“My,” Hannibal says, softly. “This will be an interesting conversation indeed.”

Alana makes a noise at that. It’s the first sound that he’s heard from her since they entered the room and the only indication that she hasn’t simply become part of the background. Sadness has made her smaller; she’s folded in on herself, skin pallid and drawn. The redness around her eyes and the swelling of her bottom lip indicates that she’d been crying, recently, and trying to stifle those cries. Will Graham’s innocence is as painful for her as his suspected guilt was. But she’s not beyond the ability to grace Hannibal with a reproachful glare for his understatement.

“Will doesn’t have to do this if he doesn’t want to,” Alana rasps out, her voice raw as though she had been screaming recently.

At the sound of his name from her mouth, Will’s eyes open again. Hannibal expects him to look angry or perhaps exasperated, but neither emotion is present. There is only resignation as his gaze finds a point on the wall just beyond the two of them. Looking at them without having to really see.

“I don’t have any illusions about things as petty as choice. If Jack wants to me to see, then I’ll see. If he wants me to listen, I can’t tune him out. Let’s not dress it up as being anymore complicated than that. You can put a bullet in my shoulder, but I draw the line at being lied

to.” Will speaks stiffly and every word makes Alana flinch and shrink further into herself. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Hannibal enjoys that.

Jack, however, is a creature devoid of shame. As scathing as Alana found Will, there’s no room for those feelings left inside of the Agent. Everything that might have once lived inside of him has been consumed by a single-minded obsession and it’s one that he has no qualms about dragging Dr. Graham back into.

“These bodies were found this morning,” Jack says, tapping his index finger against a particularly pleasing shot of the bodies as Hannibal had left them, only with their skin warmed by the morning sun. “We’re going to have to rely on prints and dental records to figure out who they were, because the killer didn’t leave us enough face for a positive ID to be made by looks alone. Forensics is still working on an identification. We should know their names by the end of the day.”

“I can’t believe you’re asking me to do this.” Will murmurs. The words are slow and quiet, as if they were never meant to leave the confines of his mind but were forced out by the pressure of everything else bouncing around in his skull. Not for the first time, Hannibal wants to crack him open and taste his thoughts directly from the source of him. “After everything that’s happened, how can you be asking me to look…”

“Graham,” Jack’s voice is cool but patient. “We found these bodies on your property this morning, nailed to your front yard. Like it or not, you were involved in this already.”

That’s the first thing that Agent Crawford has said that seems to move Will at all. He jerks back and drops his gaze down onto the photos, his eyes darting rapidly from left to right as he sweeps his gaze over the artful spread of them that Hannibal had created.

“You think I did this?” Will asks, alarmed… but then, when he actually meets Jack’s gaze, he surprises all three of them by laughing. “…No.”

Will answers his own question, a manic grin curling his mouth and threatening to split is barely healed lip again.

“No,” He repeats, his tongue flicking against the back of his teeth with visible delight. “You don’t think I did this. That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

“Will…” Alana starts to speak, her voice thick with the intent to apologize; perhaps ready to drop to her knees and begin to weep at his feet, but Will doesn’t give her the chance.

“What’s missing from the bodies?”

Jack’s answer is immediate. “Hearts. Livers. Lungs. As you can see, he carved a hole out in their chests and left some candles burning on the shelf he made with the rest of their entrails.”

Will laughs again. The sound is increasingly manic. “What else?”

“Both of them had the most recent Freddie Lounds article between their hands. It seems she was trying to create some public excitement about the book that she and Dr. Chilton are trying to release about you.”

“Though shalt have no other gods before Me.” Will murmurs, his hands twitching as though to grab a photo, but the chain that keeps him tethered to the table offers no give.

“What do you mean by that, Will?” Hannibal asks, before he can think to stop himself.

He’s desperate to know what this clever, beautiful boy thinks when he looks at the display that Hannibal created. The truth of the matter is in the very marrow of Hannibal’s bones; he knows that what Will sees here will be the closest that anyone has ever come to seeing the real him. Far beyond what could be grasped by the look in his eyes.

“I never took credit,” Will answers. “Partially because I’m innocent, but also because I don’t have any particular wish to die. The Ripper isn’t just a serial killer. He’s not driven by any need to kill or any compulsion. And every act he commits is with the same impartial touch of a god. That’s exactly what he equates himself as being – something so far above humanity that he doesn’t think of this as murder anymore than the farmer does when he butchers his prized pig. He’s a narcissist, but his inflated self-image is more accurate than any of us would like it to be. He knows that he is singularly gifted and a man like that isn’t going to sit quietly while someone else reaps the glory of his creations.”

“You believe that this is a response to Ms. Lounds declaration of intent to assign the Ripper’s legacy to someone else?”

It is… difficult to keep his voice level. But Hannibal manages to swallow his excitement back and turn it into something more professional.

“It’s at least why he was angry,” Will murmurs, his eyes scanning the photos of mottled skin. “He doesn’t typically put this kind of force into his sadism. He tortures and he mutilates, but it’s always with a delicate precision. Something upset his sensibilities beyond just the thought of someone else getting credit.”

To Jack now, Will asks an unwilling: “What exactly did the article say?”

“It talked about the book and recapped all of the public details about the case,” Jack says, immediately. “But it also included an excerpt of a chapter written by Chilton, where he dismissed all of the mysticism that surrounds the Ripper. Stated that there was no skill on your part, just proof of a bad childhood and dumb luck.”

“He insulted me,” Will murmurs, quietly.

“And by the power of transition, insulted the Ripper.” Hannibal finishes Will’s train of thought, keeping his own expression thoughtful. “It seems Ms. Lounds and Dr. Chilton have made a dangerous enemy.”

“The FBI having the wrong man in custody is only funny until it’s not,” Will agrees, leaning back in his seat again. “And it looks like the joke is officially over, as far as the Ripper is

concerned."

"It's more than just that," Jack says, his lips pursing. "This was personal."

"Why?" Will asks, his gaze reclaiming its fix on the wall. "Because it was on my front lawn?"

"Because Miriam Lass's hand was sewn into the stomach of one of our victims."

The little bit of colour that had been in Will's face drains away. He opens his mouth, but no words come out, so he closes it again and Hannibal bites the tip of his tongue to keep from showing any pleasure. So, they had already run the prints on his gift? It's truly fascinating to see things from this side, to know how the BAU operates. But he keeps his composure, furrowing his brow with false confusion.

Alana, mercifully, takes pity on him.

"Miriam Lass was an FBI trainee that Jack was mentoring. She broke protocol to follow a lead and made a jump that no one could track… and jump that led her to the Chesapeake Ripper. She disappeared two years ago. Her body was never found."

"My condolences," Hannibal says, quietly.

"It doesn't have to mean anything," Will murmurs, not at all moved by the story that he must have heard before. "At least, not as much as you think it does. You're the one who made the arrest, and everyone knows it. The letter was a threat to Lounds and Chilton, but Miriam's hand was a taunt to you. Indisputable proof that you were wrong and that the revenge you're looking for hasn't come to fruition. He wants to piss you off, Jack."

"Well, it worked." Jack grinds out through gritted teeth. His hands curl into fists on the table. "I am well and truly pissed off. And I am going to do something about this… but if I have a snowball's chance in hell of catching this son of a bitch, I need your help."

Will's response is immediate. "Not a fucking chance."

Agent Crawford doesn't bat an eye. He knew that would be Will's immediate answer, but he's not prepared to accept it. Hannibal's interest in this little show renews.

"Think about this, Graham. We all know what this means. For you, for me, for the department and for the public. There are going to be ramifications to deal with for a long, long time to come. And I'm prepared to deal with them when the time is right. But now is *not* that time. We have something bigger to deal with. If you're right about the Ripper being angry, then we can't waste any time on red tape. He's not happy about you being the face of his legacy? Then let's use that to our advantage."

"I'm going to regret asking," Will says, more to himself than to anyone else. "But how exactly do you think that's going to work?"

"By doubling down," Jack says, leaning forward with a new tone of urgency in his voice. "Lounds writes a new post on her blog, telling people that the official theory is that you have

an accomplice or that you paid someone off to make the kill in order to try to clear your name. We know, now, that he reads her blog. If your rise to infamy is making him angry, then I say we lift you a little higher. Anger is only going to make him sloppy. And when he makes that inevitable mistake, we'll be right there to bring him down."

"Counteroffer," Will says, after a long moment of silence. "What if, instead of getting Lounds involved… you just go to hell?"

"I'll go anywhere you want after we catch this son of a bitch," there's a tinge of desperation in Agent Crawford's voice now. It's clear that he didn't except this much resistance; that he thought Will would cave to the first indication that his cooperation would get him out of here. "But not a second before. I know you're angry with me, Will. But this is the closest we've ever been to the Ripper. You don't have to help. You can walk out that door if you want to. But bodies will continue to drop, and the Ripper will slip back into the shadows again. Are you prepared to live with that?"

"You'd be surprised what these last five months have shown me what, exactly, I am prepared to live with."

"Forgive my interruption," Hannibal interjects, smoothly, placing a hand on Will's shoulder. "But I believe there is a concern that has not yet been addressed."

"Which is…?" Jack asks, visibly irritated by the attempt at a subject change.

"The Chesapeake Ripper knows where Will lives," Hannibal says, simply. "It is not feasible for that to have been a simple coincidence. As his friend, I am concerned about his safety. What preventive measures are being taken to ensure that the Ripper won't harm him?"

"I share your concern," Jack says, in a voice that clearly indicates he hasn't thought much about that since they entered the room. "And that's exactly why I think it would be best if Will were to stay in here for a little longer. Somewhere out of reach."

"No."

"Graham, listen to me."

"No." Will says again, his voice black with fury. "I am not staying in here."

"It would only be a few more days. Just until Lounds can publish the article. We know the Ripper reads her work, now, and it shouldn't take long for him to start planning his next move. He'll make a mistake and we'll catch him."

"No."

"Will," Alana tries now. "Jack has a point. At least about this. You can't go home, not if the Ripper has plans to hurt you."

"You are never going to catch him," Will says, emphasizing every word in an almost sing-song fashion. "Ever. You don't understand him. You look but you can't see. And I can spell it

out for you in every language I know, but it won't help if you're not going to listen. Do you really think that he can't get to me in here? If it's all the same to you, I'd rather die at home."

"And I'd rather not find a piece of you in the next body that we open up." Jack retorts. "The only way to avoid that is to capture him, once and for all. I don't need your permission to have Lounds run the article. But I'd like it if we could cooperate together on this."

"Jack, you can't make him stay here." Alana's bravery waxes and wanes, bringing her in and out of the conversation. Hannibal wonders how close to a breakdown she is and if he'll find a way to make himself available to witness it. "I agree that we should take this chance to try and stop him, once and for all, but there has to be another way to go about this. What about a safe house?"

"I'm not trading one prison for another," Will snarls. "Especially not one that's controlled by the same people who put me in this one."

Hannibal could not have asked for a better set up. He doesn't care much for the concept of fate, but Will Graham certainly is threatening to make a believer out of him. "Stay with me, then."

Three pairs of eyes turn to him at once, all with varying levels of surprise in their gazes.

Hannibal purses his lips together, feigning embarrassment as if the words had been impulsive, but doubles down on them.

"I agree with Alana. You cannot keep Will in this place, especially not now that you are aware that he was never guilty in the first place. While I can understand and even respect your drive to catch this killer… as Will's friend, I cannot stand idly by and let you put him in a position he does not want to be in. Nor can I risk his safety by unwaveringly backing his desire to return home. Not if he will be in danger. Therefore, it seems reasonable to offer a third option. Jack, you are right in saying that Will could not possibly stop an article from Freddie Lounds being published. It seems not even the FBI could truly curb her tongue. But it is a step too far to ask Will to consent to his continued incarceration."

"Hannibal…" Will murmurs, the anger gone from his voice for the first time in what feels like an eternity. "You don't have to…"

"But I do," Hannibal says, firmly. "Jack wants you to stay here to keep up the appearance of your guilt. And I won't fight for you to return to a home that you might be murdered in. However, if my address had managed to allude even my most persistent of patients, then it should stand to reason that the Chesapeake Ripper will remain unaware of it for a few days at least."

"Hannibal," Alana interjects now. "You'll be putting yourself in danger too if you take him in. A safe house would really be the best place for him."

"He will be safe with me," Hannibal says, firmly… then allows his voice to soften. His words specifically chosen for Will. "And it would make me feel better."

Will meets his gaze directly with that familiar, guarded expression that he wears when he's searching for any hints of deceit or ill-intent. Hannibal keeps his expression as open and guileless as possible, tucking the insidious, possessive part of himself into the pocket of his aptly named "person suit". Out of sight and out of Will's grasp.

It feels like it takes an eternity, but Will does finally nod.

"Okay," he concedes, voice low. "I'll stay with you."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"No?" Jack Crawford's voice *boomed* in the small space of Dr. Chilton's office. "What the hell do you mean 'no'?"

To his credit, Fredrick did not cower. "What you're asking for is impossible, Agent Crawford. This is a prison, not a daycare center. You can't simply show up and sign Will Graham out – his release simply cannot happen until I've filed all the necessary paperwork and had it approved by the board. I can expedite the process, but it may still take anywhere from three to five days."

"Do you not understand the meaning of time sensitive?" Agent Crawford slams both of his hands down onto Chilton's desk and the vibrations from the impact shake the pens kept neatly in the cup on the corner of his desk, adding an ominous jingle to the end of his question. "I was him released into Dr. Lecter's care immediately."

"As I said, it's not possible."

Fredrick leans back in his seat and steeples his fingers to seem unaffected, but it's a flimsy and transparent display. One that even the likes of Jack Crawford must be able to see through. It's clear that the only thing more offensive to Fredrick than the idea of releasing Will is the fact that he would be giving him over into another doctor's custody, for a reason that Jack will not share with him. He's on the outside of a situation that he had helped built; Fredrick knows that he's been replaced, and he resents it.

His obvious and understandable envy would have been amusing, were it not for the way he was ruining what should be a celebratory occasion. The dominoes that Hannibal had painstakingly set up had begun to fall, revealing what was only the very beginning of his design. For a few precious moments, Hannibal had been the cat that swallowed the canary; he may as well have had yellow feathers sticking out from his teeth. There was nothing in his way.

Nothing, until now.

"Will Graham is a delicate case, Agent Crawford, as you well know." Chilton continues, remaining blissfully unaware of how firmly he is placing himself in Hannibal's crosshairs. "Frankly, I'm not sure what you hope to accomplish by removing him from an accredited hospital to the private care of a psychiatrist who has little to no experience with criminals."

"And you will remain unsure, because this is a need-to-know basis. As in, all you need-to-know is that I want Will Graham released."

"There are no shortcuts in the labyrinth of red tape. Not even for the FBI, no matter what secret plans they have set in motion."

Hannibal has had enough of this circular conversation. “I would have to agree with Dr. Chilton, Jack. It would be unethical to attempt to use your position in the FBI to skip procedures.”

A smug look crosses Fredrick’s face and Hannibal graciously allows him to feel as though he’s won… for a few seconds, before he continues.

“However, as it happens, I am friendly with quite a few of the members of the board here. I could call in a few favours and see that the process of Will’s release is taken care of quickly and painlessly.”

“Do it,” Jack says, immediately.

“Well, now, wait.” Fredrick holds up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Even if Dr. Lecter can get the board members to clear their very *busy* schedules, it will still take me at least until tomorrow to draft up all the necessary paperwork. And that’s if I work through the night.”

“Then I suggest you get started. I want Will Graham released from this hospital by tomorrow and at Dr. Lecter’s earliest convenience.”

“Ten a.m.,” Hannibal offers helpfully, watching as Fredrick turns a deep shade of red. “And if I’m to help expedite the process, then I should begin the task of making calls as soon as possible. If you’ll both excuse me…”

He inclines his head politely and begins to make his way for the door, only to be stopped by a gentle touch on his arm. He turns his head, his gaze meeting Jack’s.

“Dr. Lecter, I don’t suppose you would mind being the one to tell Will about the change in plans?”

For a moment, Hannibal is tempted to say no. To simply attach Agent Crawford to a hook and dangle him in front of Will and entice him into taking a bite out of the bait. But no. The trouble of the setup is only worth its while when Hannibal is present to reap its rewards.

“Of course,” Hannibal smiles thinly. “It would be my pleasure.”

(***)

“Stop staring at me.” Will mutters, watching out of the corner of his eye as Alana flushes pink with embarrassment.

“I didn’t realize that I was.”

“Well, you know now.” Will rolls his shoulders, grimacing as they click and pop but offer no relief from the tension that has him feeling like he’s turning into stone. “Just knock it off.”

“Will…”

He doesn’t see her start to reach to touch his arm, but he feels it in an electric charge as she almost grabs him and he recoils away from her, shifting as far over on the bench outside of Chilton’s office as he can without falling over the edge and landing at the feet of the orderly who’s supposed to be watching him.

Alana freezes with her hand still outstretched. He can see the hurt that pinches her expression with his periphery view and there’s a pang in his heart in response to it; a silent warning that her feelings are strong enough to wrap around him like vines and tangle him up until he can’t remember why he was ever mad at her in the first place; only that he wants her (and his) pain to stop.

“That’s not fair,” he sighs and closes his eyes. “How do *you* get to make *me* feel guilty?”

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty, Will.” Alana practically pounces on the chance to push for a conversation. He gives an inch; she takes a mile. “I don’t want you to feel guilty. What I did… I know that I hurt you. And I know that I can’t take that hurt back. But I want to make it up to you. I think that if we just talked about it…”

She trails off and Will doesn’t need to open his eyes to know that hers are sparkling with unshed tears. He can hear it in the thickness of her voice and in every hitch of air in her lungs.

He tries to think of that shield that Hannibal told him he has; imagines it as hunk of large, rusted steel with thorns wrapped around it. Impossible to grasp or get past. Then he ducks behind it and lets the words slip from his tongue without a second thought.

“I know you want to talk to me about it; that you want to *apologize* and perform a bunch of meaningless acts of service so that you can feel like you’re doing everything you can to make things right between us. And maybe that would be enough if you were doing it for me, but you’re not. You just want to feel better about yourself. And I can’t help but think that it’s not really my problem if you can sleep at night.”

“How can you say that?” Alana’s voice is hardly more than a whisper and it crackles with emotion. “I just want to make it up to you, anyway I can. If you don’t want me to apologize, then just tell me what you do want, and I’ll do it.”

“Really? Anything I want?”

“Anything.”

“Okay,” Will cracks open one eye. “Then just go away.”

It’s hard to tell if it’s conviction or hurt that has Alana slowly getting to her feet, lips parted as if she’s thinking about arguing or maybe saying something to hurt him back… but she just presses them together so hard that they tremble and turns her back on him instead. Not quite leaving – not without Jack – but giving him space, at least.

There's not enough time to be grateful. Hannibal steps out of Chilton's office and Will springs to his feet, too, a little less steady without free use of his hands to keep his body balanced. He half walks and half staggers over to Hannibal, pointedly ignoring Alana as though their conversation had never happened at all.

"Will," Hannibal greets him with a frown.

And Will immediately knows that he doesn't like that look. "He's not letting me leave, is he?"

"Not tonight, no." Hannibal doesn't mince words. "I am afraid that the process of releasing a prisoner can be complicated. And though I have the connections to expedite the process substantially, you will not be able to leave until the morning."

"Great. That should give him plenty of time to think of another reason why I can't leave." Will mutters sourly. His eyes burn with enraged tears, and he turns his head to hide it. "I wonder if I'll be allowed to be buried in a cemetery or if they'll just stick my body in the basement."

"I will be here at ten o'clock in the morning," Hannibal almost sounds amused at Will's melodrama, but when he casts a suspicious glance in his direction, the doctor's face is impassive. "And I will be removing you from this place, with or without Fredrick Chilton's blessing."

"I wouldn't count on him making it any easier for you than he already is." Will bites the inside of his cheek, counting on the pain to distract him from the emotion turmoil.

He doesn't want to go back to his cell. Not for a night, not for an hour, not even for thirty seconds. But there's nothing that he, or anyone else, can do about it. And, somehow, being subjected to Chilton's whims makes him feel a lot colder now that he knows there is another option.

"Promise me." Will says, after a moment of silence.

Hannibal doesn't ask for clarification. "I promise I will take you from this place tomorrow."

"Even if it means dealing with Chilton?" Will tries to smile, to mask the pathetic desperation that he feels roiling in his gut. "I mean, taking a bullet for me is one thing – but that guy is annoying."

"Academics often are." Hannibal's answering smile is a promise itself. "Unfortunately, to ensure that I keep my promise I'll need to leave. I have a few phone calls to make, and they're best done in privacy. I would like to join your escort back to your cell, first."

"I'd rather you do it than him," Will jerks his head in the direction of the bored looking orderly. "But somehow I don't think he's going to let us take his keys and go alone."

"It is not likely, no." Hannibal's gaze shifts away from Will and lands on Alana. "Dr. Bloom, will you be joining us?"

Will immediately stiffens, refusing to follow Hannibal's gaze to where Alana stands and pretends that she wasn't listening to their conversation.

"No, I don't think so." Alana answers. Her voice is calmer than it was before. "I think I'll just wait for Jack.

It's somehow both a bitter sadness and a sweet relief to hear her say that. He's not ready to deal with her again so soon… but he also wonders if there's a future where their friendship is even close to what it had been. If that was something he wanted. Or if it had ever really been that way at all.

It's too confusing to think about, so he tries not to. Just jerks his head in the direction of his cell and indicates that Hannibal start walking while he waits for the Orderly to amble over and *drag* him back for one more night of confinement.

Just… one more.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is short and sweet, but I wanted to offer one last moment of refuge before the chapter that is coming next. Sorry in advance for what it is going to do to you guys. Try to enjoy this moment.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Under the words of men
Something is tempting the father
Where is your will, my friend?
Insatiates never even bother

- The Devil in I by Slipknot

“I hope you don’t mind,” Hannibal says, as he places the record gently into the phonograph. “I am a little out of sorts, this evening, and I find that music is the simplest cure to the unrest of anticipation. It does help me focus. Tell me, Mr. Roberts… are you a fan of opera music?”

A soft moan of pain sounds out from deeper into the room, almost inaudible as the record begins to spin and the first notes of a melody begin to play. Hannibal turns his head just enough to look over his shoulder, watching the man who is strapped down onto the medical palette as he weakly struggles against his restraints. Beads of sweat appear at his hairline.

“I have found that opera music is underappreciated by many people,” he continues, as though Roberts had, in fact, answered his question. He selects a pair of vinyl gloves from the box on the shelf and pulls them on with an ease born of year of practice before he crosses the room and comes to stand in front of the writhing man. “Fortunately for you, it is never too late to learn.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Roberts rasps out, spilling out from behind his closed eyelids.

“It is, however, too late for apologies,” Hannibal says, firmly, as he begins the careful process of cleaning the skin of his abdomen, disinfecting the area. “Turandot is not traditionally how I would introduce a new mind to the art… but I am feeling sentimental. And while the composition of the music may sometimes be lacking, the story itself is terribly romantic.”

“*Please*,” Roberts begs. His arm twitches and the movement sends vibrations up the IV that Hannibal had inserted, causing the liquid in the bag to tremble.

“I don’t suppose you speak Italian?”

Hannibal picks up a marker, next, and begins to leave careful dashes of black ink against his skin. A simple precaution against cutting in the wrong places; without an extra pair of hands to help cauterize the blood vessels as they’re cut into or to siphon the blood so that he can better see what he’s doing, it is almost too easy to make a fatal mistake.

And killing is too important a task to do by accident.

“Allow me to explain, then.” Hannibal continues, setting aside his marker and picking up his scalpel next. “Turandot is a love story between a princess who has built walls around her heart and a prince who has lost everything he once held dear and hidden himself in plain sight to avoid death.”

“I’m sorry I hurt those girls,” Roberts sniffs, his shoulders shaking. “I didn’t mean to. I know I’m sick. And I’ll get help! I will! You don’t have to do this.”

“I very rarely do anything that I don’t want to, Mr. Roberts. And if you are hoping to appeal to my humanity, then you will be disappointed to learn that I have none. It is energy that would be better spent praying to whichever god you think has not yet abandoned you.”

The first stroke of scalpel to flesh turns a crimson tide over the man’s abdomen, one that Hannibal carefully wipes away in between following the outline that he had created.

“Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The story begins with failure. The Princess had sworn an oath, long ago, that she would ask all her suitors three riddles. If they guessed the correct answer for each one, she would marry them. But if they got even one wrong, they were to be executed. The Princess had been born with an intimate knowledge of pain and mistrust; as she came into the world with the spirit of one of her ancestors inside of her; another princess from another time, who ruled her lands with great care and kept them in peace until the day an invasion was led by a foreign prince, who murdered her. Knowing her ancestor’s story and pain intimately, the princess allowed her heart to be surrounded by ice and swore that she would never allow a man to wed her. The threat of death did not stop men from trying, of course and we begin with a prince who failed to answer the riddles and was sentenced to be beheaded under with the next rising moon.”

Hannibal spreads Roberts skin back and clips it out of the way, pleased to see that he had gone no higher and no lower than necessary, and carefully siphons the pooling blood out of the cavity in the man so that he can survey his spoils.

“Do you believe that first impressions are important, Mr. Roberts?”

There is no answer apart from shallow, painful breathing.

“Personally, I think that they are everything. How we present ourselves lays the foundation for all future expectations. Our growth depends on the seeds we sow with others just as much as the ones we grow in our private gardens. As such, you should be quite pleased,” Hannibal has no qualms carrying on this one-sided conversation as he begins his careful extraction of the man’s liver. “I will be entertaining a special guest come tomorrow and I believe will find your company delicious.”

He pauses and then reaches up with his free hand, lightly slapping the palm of his hand against Roberts’ face; rousing him from the fugue he had been attempting to lose himself in to escape the situation. He leaves a smear of blood on his cheek, but it works. The man opens his eyes; glazed and unfocused though they are.

“First impressions are important in this story, too. The crowd that gathered to witness the death of the failed suitor cried for his blood until the moment they saw his beauty. It was

then, and only then, that the crowd began to wail for their princess and beg her to spare his life. She comes when they call, but she has no mercy for the man and orders the execution to continue. The crowd weeps, all except for the secret prince. His own cries for the failed suitor are forgotten at the sight of her; so overwhelmed with love is he. So besotted that, even after witnessing the death of her previous suitor and hearing the hissed warnings from those around him, he still calls her name and states his intention to court her."

Mr. Roberts' head lolls off to the side, his expression contorted with pain. Hannibal pays it no mind.

"He is a stubborn man, this prince. Willing to risk anything for her love. When he is advised by three ministers to return to his homeland or die, he refuses. When he is met by the king and told that the princess has a heart too cold for love and that he must recant, the prince refuses. And when our cruel princess, herself, tells him the story of the spirit she houses inside of her and why she will never marry, inviting him to run before she kills him too, he refuses. He loves her too dearly to imagine a life without her. And so, she asks her riddles."

Hannibal deftly sets the man's liver aside once he's cut it free, blood slick fingers reaching for the vacuum to remove more blood.

"The Princess asks, "*What is born each night and dies each dawn?"* And the prince knows the answer immediately and tells her that it is "hope". The first riddle is passed, and it unnerves the Princess, but does not deter her. "*What flickers red and is warm like a flame, but is not fire?"* And this question gives the prince pause…"

Hannibal absently runs his tongue against the thumb of his glove, tasting the answer before he says it.

"But our prince is intelligent, and he tells her that it is "blood". Now the second riddle has been passed and the princess is frightened. The crowd cheers for the prince and fear turns into anger when she presents her last riddle, knowing that he will falter like all the others. *"What is ice which gives you fire and which your fire freezes still more?"* But the prince does not hesitate. He calls her name and answers the final riddle."

Hannibal reaches for the bone saw next. Though he'll only be serving Will Foie gras poêlé for his first night in his home, it would be a sin to waste the rest. And lung is quite the delicacy.

"Turandot is devastated and drops to her knees, begging her father not to leave her to the mercy of this Prince, but she is bound by oath. Furious and frightened, she asks the prince if he intends to take her by force, but the prince stops her and presents a riddle of his own. He tells her that if she can learn his name and tell him before sunrise, then he will die at dawn. Her pursuit of the answer that will save her from him only sharpens her cruelty. She has a slave girl, who has been in love with the prince for a long while now, tortured when she will not reveal his name. The girl refuses to betray him and, in her desperation not to cause his death, she warns the princess that she too will learn the exquisite joy of love before she steals a dagger from a soldier's belt and kills herself, taking the prince's name with her."

Hannibal lifts a blood-soaked bone from the chest cavity and sets it to the side. Mr. Roberts doesn't make a sound.

"The prince admonishes Turandot for her cruelty, then takes her into his arms and kisses her. With that simple gesture, the princess realizes that she loves and hates him in equal measure and admits this to him. Then she begs him to leave and take his mystery with him. But the prince loves her too much to be without her, so he offers her a gift instead – he tells her his name and with it, gives her the power to destroy him if she so desires. To be without her would be death already; to deny her freedom if she wants it, too cruel."

Hannibal drops another bone onto the table. He can feel the life leaving Mr. Robert's, but there's no passion in his passing. No thrall. Hannibal stares down at the dying man but sees no part of him. Only cool blue eyes and chapped lips turned up into a smile.

"…When it's time for the Princess to answer his riddle," Hannibal says, his hands stilling. "She tells the crowd that she knows his name… and, standing before them all, she proclaims that he is love. And everyone rejoices. A bit trite, I know, but as I said… I'm feeling sentimental."

Another bone added to the pile. Mr. Robert's heart struggles to beat as Hannibal begins the process of moving his lungs as he's still struggling to use them and continues on speaking long after he's certain that the man can no longer hear him.

"Opera is more than just musical artistry, more than just a powerful voice. The story behind every word must be equally as moving, or something wonderful is lost. And though real life is never quite like the stories we tell ourselves, there comes a time when we all must offer up the key to our destruction and hope that the one we love will not use it."

(***)

Will doesn't remember falling asleep.

He's not even entirely sure that he did. Somewhere between counting the seconds until his release from this miserable hellhole and watching the sky in his mind bleed from grey-black to resplendent pinkish-blue, exhaustion closed in on him and he slipped into a moment of dark, sweet oblivion. A blink in time where he's not himself but he's not anyone else, either. Drifting without dreaming…

And then, when he opens his eyes again, the nightmare begins.

"Jesus Christ!" Will swears as he bolts upright, nearly smashing his head right into Matthew's face as it looms over him. "What the hell?!"

“Dr. Graham!” Matthew takes a full step back and holds his hands out, palms upturned. It’s not quite a gesture of surrender; more like a promise that he’s unarmed. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I called your name a few times, but you didn’t budge. I was just about to try and shake you awake.”

Will grunts, uncertain how much of that he believes. He rubs at his face with his hands, then cracks open one eye to look at Matthew.

“What time is it?”

“About a quarter to ten,” Matthew answers, immediately. “I wouldn’t have bothered you, but Dr. Chilton wants to see you in his office.”

“No, no. It’s fine. I’m glad you woke me,” Will murmurs, immediately wondering why he felt the need to be polite to a budding serial killer. Part of him wants to look a little closer at Matthew; to see if he’s gone over that edge yet or if his murder fantasies still only get played out in his head… but the rest of him recoils from the idea and he fixes his gaze pointedly in any other direction but his.

“Today’s not really the day to test Chilton’s limits,” Matthew says, shrugging almost apologetically, as if loathe to admit that he hadn’t done it with Will’s desires in mind. “He’s in a shit mood. Worse than usual.”

Will’s answering hum is non-committal, but he swears internally. It was a mistake not to mention Matthew to Jack or Hannibal. He hadn’t been thinking… and now he’s uncertain what, exactly, Matthew was going to do or say when he realized that Chilton was angry because Will was being released. Would his bizarre hero worship extend beyond the BSHCI’s walls? Was he going to go around, still believing that Will was the Ripper? He chews on his inner cheek and makes a mental note to tell Hannibal to tell Jack to keep an eye on him.

“Hands,” Matthew says, bringing Will back to reality.

He lifts them, instinctively, then grimaces as he realizes that he’s being handcuffed again. It was a long shot to hope that he wouldn’t have to wear these again after last night, but of course. Chilton probably emphasized it, wanting to get one last dig in at him.

Asshole.

There is little in the way of self-soothing, now. Even knowing that Chilton stands as the very last obstacle between him and getting to breathe outside air doesn’t do much to elevate his mood. Fredrick isn’t going to make this easy on him. Even if Jack had told him the whole truth, which he likely hadn’t since he’s too cozy with Lounds to trust, there would be that underlying want inside of the doctor. That desire to have Will locked up and studied for the rest of his life. To be demeaned and broken and less-than-human because that would be the easiest way for Fredrick to profit off him; if no one cared how Will was treated because no one can relate to him enough to think of him as a person.

Matthew jerks Will back out of his bitter reverie. “Guess what I did this weekend.”

Will already doesn't like this game. "I couldn't begin to."

"C'mon," Matthew wheedles as they take a turn and start for the main hall that would lead them to Chilton's office. "Just guess."

Will wishes that he could pinch the bridge of his nose and fend off the headache that was beginning to dully throb in his skull. "I don't know. Caught a movie? Went on a date? Did anything normal?"

"Close," Matthew's breath is hot on Will's ear. "I went to your house, actually. After all the cops were done sniffing around. They'd already cleared out the bodies, but I could see the blood stains… you know, if you had designs you wanted to get out there, you could have asked me."

Will stiffens, trying not to shudder at the proximity of Matthew's mouth to his ear. "I had nothing to do with that."

"It was beautiful," Matthew murmurs, ignoring Will's refusal to accept blame. "I saw the photos on Tattlecrime. I still think I could have done it better than whoever you had help you, but I could see your vision."

Matthew should be the one in handcuffs, Will realizes. The thought occurs to him like it never has before and he nearly stops walking; only keeps moving forward because Matthew half-drags him. Matthew was genuinely dangerous, genuinely deluded, and just generally disturbing. He may not have killed yet, but he wants to. He wants it more than anything and somehow, he's the one leading Will through the halls of this prison; undetected by even so-called "best minds" in the state whose only job is to detect and treat this kind of insanity.

Jack's come in here and seen him before. So has Alana. Hell, Chilton works with him daily. And somehow, Will had already known that they would stay oblivious to who and what Matthew really was until he told them, himself.

They couldn't see evil when it was staring them in the face, but they'd somehow put him in here. Will clenches his hands into fists, his knuckles turning white.

"Here we are, doctor." Matthew seems to be oblivious to rage pulsing inside of Will as he opens the door to Fredrick's office and pushes him inside. "In we go."

Will stumbles the few feet forward that he's pushed while Matthew closes the door and Chilton looks up from the papers on his desk, surprise quickly turning into irritation.

"What are you doing in here?" Fredrick spits the question out through gritted teeth as he stands. "You know very well that I don't allow patients into my office. Mr. Brown, you should know better than to let Graham sweet talk you. Get him out of here imm – what are you doing?"

Will snaps his head in Matthew's direction as fast as he can, but he's not quick enough to stop what's happening. He's only able to see it as it does.

Matthew, holding a gun with a silencer attached to the muzzle.

Matthew, looking calmer than Will has ever seen him.

And Matthew, pulling the trigger.

The bullet shoots from the gun with a muted hiss of air and Will can see it from the corner of his eye as blood sprays, speckling both Chilton's desk and the wall behind him with crimson before Chilton falls, hitting the ground with a dull "thud".

"That… felt awesome," Matthew breathes. "Oh, god. That was even better than I imagined it would be."

"Matthew?" Will's voice sounds strange to his own ears and he's not sure if it's the shock or the echo of the gunshot that's still reverberating around in his skull. "What did you just do?"

"What I had to," some of the excitement ebbs from Matthew's voice and Will can only watch, curiously numb, as Matthew turns the gun on him now. "I know you're leaving. I heard him talking about it on the phone. They're taking you out of here and putting you in the custody of some other doctor."

Will nods slowly. "They are."

The confirmation seems to wound him. Matthew's eyes grow impossibly wide and his lips part in an "o" of perfect horror. He starts to shake his head.

"I can't let them do that, Dr. Graham. You know I can't. I need you here. You're the only one that gets me. You're the only one that sees me. I won't let them take that away from me."

"I don't think you're going to get a choice in that." Will keeps his eyes trained on the gun, the handcuffs around his wrists suddenly even more restraining than they had been. "What's the plan here, Matthew? You just shot Dr. Chilton. You're not wearing any gloves, so your prints are all over the murder weapon while I'm in handcuffs. If you're planning on framing me, then you've already fucked yourself."

"I'm not going to frame you, Dr. Graham." It's almost painful how sincere Matthew's voice is. He takes a step closer, his eyes still wide. "I wouldn't do that to you. No one would believe it, anyway. Your kills are art. I couldn't write your name on this, even if I thought it would work. I respect you too much to do that. I tried to get close to you while you were here. I was your friend, but I know you weren't mine. I thought I could win you over, but there's not enough time now. I need to get close to you."

Will takes a step back as Matthew takes a step forward, his eyes still never leaving the gun. Wondering if he'll be able to see the direction that the bullet will come from if he watches his hand. Wonders if he'll be able to dodge it and get back on his feet fast enough to grab something off Chilton's desk and use it as a weapon of his own.

"Dr. Graham, don't freak out." Matthew's voice is soothing, now, and Will wonders what his expression must look like to have brought that out in him. "I'm not going to shoot you. I only

brought the gun to deal with him. I could never hurt you like that."

"Funny, I'm having a hard time trusting you." Will licks his lips and swallows hard, but it does nothing to stop the way that his throat feels like it's closing in on itself.

"Here. Watch." Matthew slowly takes the clip out of the gun and drops the remaining bullets. They scatter against the carpet, falling like rain. Then Matthew throws the clip to one side of the room and the barrel to the other. Neither one of them could possibly move fast enough to put it back together. "See?"

Matthew steps closer, holding his hands out gently like he's trying to coax a wounded animal to stay still long enough for him to help. Will takes another step back in response and nearly trips over one of the chairs. He stumbles and *swears*, trying to lean forward to compensate and correct his balance, but all that does is send him closer to Matthew, who grabs him and pulls him into a tight embrace. Every line of Will's body presses up to his, with his hands stuck between them.

And then Matthew pulls the knife out of his pocket and forces the blade into Will's abdomen.

It burns. Cold steel and hot pain, mixing together and sending a wave of nausea through him. He can't move. He can't think. He can't *breathe*. All he can do stare at Matthew and see the reflection of himself in the depth of his gaze. Watch as horror distorts his own face.

Matthew slides the knife while it's still inside of him. He saws through Will's flesh with one hand while his other grips Will's throat, keeping him upright while he carves through him.

And when he lets go, Will falls.

He doesn't feel the pain from the impact, though the way that his teeth snap together tells him that he hit his head hard. And he stares, dazed, as Matthew stands over him.

"I always thought your work was beautiful," Matthew says, as he brings the knife up to his mouth and wipes his tongue along the width of it, tasting Will's blood. "But I don't think I ever really understood the cannibalism. Not until I realized that you were going away from me. When I felt so empty at the thought of you being gone. I can't keep you here, but I can take part of you. You know, the Iroquois used to eat their enemies to take their strength. I read that, after I found out who you were."

Matthew kneels next to him and presses the flat of his palm against Will's stomach. And if Will could scream, he would have in that moment. But all he can do is choke, tasting a coppery tang in the back of his throat.

"I wonder what happens when you eat someone you love," Matthew murmurs. "When I have parts of you inside of me, I wonder what I'll be able to take from you."

Will closes his eyes as the clock on the wall behind Matthew strikes ten.

Chapter End Notes

Currently accepting my well-deserved death threats over on VivantViolence on Tumblr.

Chapter 12

Choke, choke again, I thought my demons were my friends
Pity me in the end, they're out to get me
Since I was young I tasted sorrow on my tongue
And this sweet sugar gun does not protect me

- Coming Undone by Korn

The air is heavy with the coppery scent of fresh blood. It lingers like a cheap and pungent cologne, tickling the insides of Hannibal's nose as he nears Fredrick Chilton's office. Curiosity gives him pause and he takes a moment to adjust the cuff of his sleeve, wondering what sort of *trouble* the doctor had gotten himself into. And, more to the point, who had attempted to correct Fredrick's ghastly behaviour before Hannibal had a chance to.

Ah, well. He hopes that the assailant, whoever it was, had enjoyed the taste of violence. As much as Hannibal might have liked to look the other way and leave the victor to their spoils, Will Graham is still out of reach for as long as Chilton held the key to his release from that dismal cage. And that simply won't do.

Hannibal stops pretending to fuss with his sleeve and strolls the rest of the way down the hall, offering nothing more than a courteous nod to the oblivious orderlies that were milling about their day, blissfully unaware of the warm, metallic scent that only grew stronger as Hannibal approached the door. He reaches for the nod and attempts to turn it, quietly, to keep the upper hand in the situation… but he meets resistance.

It's locked.

Hannibal checks his watch. Only two minutes to ten. He could go and fetch one of the dead-eyed orderlies that are still wandering around like particularly idiotic sheep, but he's already learned that few of them carry business cards and the temptation to correct their inevitable rudeness would simply be too great without knowing that he could always come back to them later. So, he lifts his hand and prepares to tap his knuckles against the door, curious to know what will happen if he simply knocks.

He hears a voice before his can quite graze the door and freezes in place, listening carefully.

""I always thought your work was beautiful," comes the reverent words from a mouth intent on worshipping. Hannibal can place it immediately – Mr. Brown, the offensive orderly. "But I don't think I ever really understood the cannibalism. Not until I realized that you were going away from me. When I felt so empty at the thought of you being gone. I can't keep you here, but I can take part of you. You know, the Iroquois used to eat their enemies to take their strength. I read that, after I found out who you were."

Hannibal leans a little closer, hearing fabric rustling and then, suddenly, a noise of pain being wetly choked out. But it doesn't sound like Fredrick; the tone of the vibrations is all wrong. Suddenly, there is no amusement in finding a budding serial killer committing the act in the bowels of a mental hospital. There is no lingering curiosity, because the answer is there. Matthew Brown is on the other side of this door.

And Will Graham is in there with him.

A strange ringing sound fills Hannibal's ears as the rest of the world seems to simply fall away. He knows that Matthew is still speaking on the other side of the door, can hear the quiet murmurs, but the words have no meaning to him. He may as well have been trying to understand the squealing language of a gluttonous swine that pushes its siblings out of the way so that it can be the first to get a mouthful of food.

With an unnatural calm, Hannibal takes a few steps back from the door and carefully removes a handkerchief from his breast pocket to delicately unwrap the scalpel he had stashed there. He slips it up his sleeve for ease of access, holding it securely in his left hand before lunging forward in a brief running start and slamming his right shoulder into the door with all his might, knocking it loose off its hinges. He kicks it the rest of the way down and out of his way, sending splinters of wood and paint chips raining down over the two men on the ground.

Hannibal has only a second to take in the scene, but that's still more time than he needs to see Will Graham lying on the floor, his prison jumpsuit drenched with blood. And Matthew Brown, kneeling over him, reaching for him like he means to stick his hand inside of Will Graham, grasp his entrails, and bring them up to his greedy, underserving mouth.

Matthew's eyes dart up from Will's form, his hand hovering just a few precious millimeters from the wound. Hannibal can see him begin to contemplate his options, but he doesn't allow him to find them. With much more speed than a man his size should ever be capable of, Hannibal lunges forward. He doesn't make a sound as he grasps Matthew Brown by the back of his neck; just holds him in place so that he can bash his knee into the Orderly's startled face. He can both hear and feel the satisfying *crunch* of his nose crumpling under the force of it and he lets go of Matthew's neck only to grasp him by the shoulder and throw him across the room.

He collides with one of Dr. Chilton's bookshelves and crumples gracelessly on the ground. Blood gushes from his nose and his eyes have already begun to blacken, but he spits out a mouthful of crimson and struggles to his feet, holding out the knife that he must have used on Will and pointing it at Hannibal. He leans forward, trying to rely on momentum alone to guide the blade into Hannibal's gut, but he easily side-steps it and swings at him with his right hand, landing a solid blow and carving a line of crimson across his face. He loses his grip on the scalpel on impact and it clatters to the floor.

Mr. Brown uses the split-second that Hannibal takes to look down to attempt to rush him again, rage and adrenaline allowing him the chance to turn the tables, but inexperience placing roadblocks in his path. He slashes to the right and Hannibal dodges to the left. He swings to the left and Hannibal weaves to the right. Every move that Matthew makes is practically televised in the moments before he actually follows through on them and Hannibal might have laughed if it wasn't so infuriating. This pathetic, untested killer who

was still wet around the ears… he had cut into Will Graham's body? He thought himself worthy to taste any part of him?

Hannibal's eye twitches and when Matthew stumbles forward this time, he catches his arm and jerks him downward while he brings his knee up, not just breaking but *shattering* his arm.

Matthew screams and the knife clatters to the floor. Hannibal squeezes his fist around the arm that he had just smashed, listening to Matthew bleat out a second cry of pain while he grabs the knife up off the floor. Once the handle in his hand, he shoves Matthew against Fredrick's desk and holds the blade up to his throat.

The monster inside of him; the darkness in the shape of a man that Hannibal hid so carefully… it practically purrs as Hannibal prepares to cut his throat open and rip his tongue out through the hole that he made so that he can take a bite out of it in front of the man as he bleeds out; so he can show him what a true monster looks like and let him see which predator in the room would ever have the pleasure of dining on Will Graham's body as he breathes his last breath…

And Will coughs wetly, the very breath that he struggles to draw in threatens to choke the life out of him as it meets the resistance of the blood that's traveled up his windpipe and reminds Hannibal of where he is and what will come next. Police, of course. An investigation. Hannibal can claim self-defense in the circumstances of killing this man, but he couldn't possibly explain such a flagrant act of sadism. Perhaps wouldn't care to, if Will Graham died on the floor of this office…

But no. He won't allow that. If Will Graham will not die here. He's not allowed death unless it's by Hannibal's hands and his hands alone. Grappling with what remains of his self-control, Hannibal moves the blade from Matthew's throat and slams his head down onto the desk, instead, rendering him unconscious. His body folds in on itself, as effortless as egg whites into a souffle, and he falls to the ground within inches of Fredrick Chilton's body.

Hannibal has no concern for the man, despite the blood that surrounds him too. He can see the shallow rise and fall of his chest and the rapid blinking behind his eyes. Not dead or unconscious; simply pretending to be. Cowering from the situation. Hannibal offers him no medical attention, simply steps over him and grasps the heavy cloth of the curtain hanging over the window and rips it down from the rod it's connected to before marching back to Will and kneeling beside him, blood immediately soaking into his pants.

He meets Will Graham's eyes, but Will does not look back at him. His eyes were vacant and unseeing; skin so pallid that if it wasn't for the shallow breaths that shook his slight frame, Hannibal might have thought he was already dead.

"Will," Hannibal says, despite not knowing if his boy can hear him or not. "I need to inspect your wound so that I can assess the damage and then bind it until an ambulance can arrive. This will cause you some pain, but I assure you that you are safe."

Will doesn't move. His eyes don't even flicker.

“You are safe,” Hannibal says again, as he begins to peel the sodden fabric back from the gaping wound in Will’s stomach.

Blood is drying to his skin almost as quickly as it seeps from the long cut across his lower abdomen. He’s nearly been gutted, but the blade stopped short from perforating his bowel. Matthew had been unable to reach inside and begin to pull his small intestine out through the wound and Hannibal could *almost* sigh in relief. Though the possibility of sepsis is not off the table, the likelihood is significantly less than what he had feared. He takes the curtain and begins to fold it around Will’s abdomen, attempting to staunch the bleeding and keep it from prolonged exposure to the open air.

Hannibal reaches into the pocket of his trousers, fishing his phone out with blood slick fingers. He dials the emergency service line and then holds the phone to his ear with his shoulder so that he can use both hands to apply pressure to the wound.

“My name is Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” he says, as soon as a voice answers him. “I am at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and I need an ambulance sent here at once. An orderly has attacked a doctor and one of the former patients.”

(***)

Will opens his eyes and he sees Hannibal Lecter’s face hovering over his, lips moving to form words of reassurance that he can’t quite hear over the roaring in his ears.

*

Will closes his eyes and he sees the darkness in the depths of Matthew’s gaze. An echo of the moment when Matthew had taken his knife and shoved it inside of his body. The emotions there should be incoherent to any sane mind, but Will can read them.

*

Will opens his eyes and he sees the bright light of day. The sun is beating down on him, secure in its position in the sky, but the clouds move quickly. He is lying down, and someone is pushing him along.

*

Will closes his eyes and he sees loneliness in the shape of a man. Matthew is small in this form, pathetic and wanting. But his teeth are as sharp as needles. He grabs Will’s arm in his impossibly strong hand and sinks his teeth in, ripping a chunk of flesh from the bone.

*

Will opens his eyes and sees an IV bag. Hannibal holds it steady with one hand and uses his other to brush Will’s hair back from his forehead. The earth rumbles and sirens are shrill in

the air.

*

Will closes his eyes and sees himself, lying on the floor. Blood pours like water from a fountain and the sight of it makes his mouth water. He slinks forward, gaze shifting over every inch of the feast presented before him. This is the cure to loneliness. He only has to take and devour to fill that void inside of him. Will is the victim and he is the killer. They'll both be destroyed by the end of this.

*

Will opens his eyes and sees fluorescent lights flying above him. They zip past, moving along at an alarming speed… or are they staying still while he moves?

*

Will closes his eyes and sees Matthew standing in front of him. Matthew raises his right hand in greeting and smiles sheepishly. Will follows, his own hand lifting and the corner of his mouth twitching with embarrassed amusement too. Matthew sighs. Will sighs. Matthew blinks. Will blinks. Matthew lunges forward and the glass cracks on impact with Will's forehead. The mirror falls away into a thousand pieces and Matthew falls with it.

He was only Will's reflection. They are the ***same.***

*

Will Graham opens his eyes to nothing and tries to scream. His mouth opens wide, the muscles in his neck taut and bulging with the effort to make a sound; but nothing comes. There's something on his face, he realizes, and terror convinces him that it's a gag. He reaches up, feeling something tug on his arm (restraints?) and tries to rip whatever it is off his face, but someone stops him. He feels a tight grip on his wrist and the moment of contact is an anchor, pulling him out of the abyss that he had been endlessly drifting in. His vision clears and Hannibal's face swims into view.

"Will," Hannibal says, his voice gentle but commanding. "Let go of the respirator."

He's still clutching the thing on his face, he realizes. Pain blossoms as the knowledge makes it to his brain, his fingers suddenly realizing that they are aching with the effort. He relaxes his grip, immediately, and allows Dr. Lecter to pull his hand from his face.

"There we are," Hannibal paths the back of Will's hand reassuringly as he arranges it back by his side. "Your oxygen levels are still too low for us to remove this."

"Hnn-" Will tries to speak; tries to get his name out along with the thousands of questions that were swelling inside of him, but this throat is too dry. He coughs and his chest burns with the pain of it.

"Don't try to speak." Hannibal squeezes Will's hand and, mercifully, begins to offer the explanations that Will can't quite ask for. "You've just undergone surgery, Will. You were

sedated for ten hours and only brought back to this room forty-five minutes ago. You don't have the excess energy to spare. Just rest."

"Mmm," Will tries again, turning his head as best he can to look around the room. He's in a hospital bed, that's for sure, but it doesn't look like the one at BSHCI. This one has a TV on the wall and he's almost positive he's not in handcuffs. But even knowing that he isn't in the prison, his heart races. The monitor picks it up. Where the hell is Matthew? What happened? "Mmm…"

Hannibal leans over him and presses a button on the panel beside him. Within seconds, the door opens and a nurse peeks in.

"Yes, Dr. Lecter?" She asks, breathless as though she had sprinted there. "Can I help you?"

"Dr. Graham has awoken in a state of panic and needs a dose of milder sedatives." Hannibal says, smoothly.

"Of course, doctor. Right away."

Will turns his head in the other direction and squints his eyes as best he can at Hannibal, hoping his gaze carries his anger and betrayal, instead of just fear and exhaustion.

Evidently, it does, because Hannibal gazes apologetically at him. "It's for your own good. I'll be right here the whole time."

That shouldn't be as comforting as it is. He still has so many questions and no idea where Matthew is – if he got away, if he… oh, God, if he *ate* any of Will. How Will got here… it's all a mystery, a black void where memories should be, and it shouldn't be enough that Hannibal is there and promises to stay.

But it is. And as the nurse fiddles with the IV and Will begins to feel exhaustion flood through him, he knows it would be fighting a lost cause up the side of a soap-slick hill. Terror still grips him as his eyelids flutter and he reaches out blindly until Hannibal takes his hand. Will holds onto him for dear life as he falls back into oblivion, trusting that the doctor will pull him back out.

Chapter 13

When I was a man I thought it ended
When I knew love's perfect ache
But my peace has always depended
On all the ashes in my wake

- Arsonist's Lullabye by Hozier

The dawn of a new day creeps quietly over the buildings in the distance and casts a soft white glow over Will Graham's sleeping form; it illuminates the varied shades of brown that make up the rich colour of his unruly curls and makes his lashes seem longer with the shadows that they cast against his cheeks. The blood transfusions had brought the colour back to his face and the morphine has dulled the pain, allowing him to look… almost peaceful.

With the hand that Will isn't holding onto like a lifeline, Hannibal brushes one of those curls out of his eyes and smiles fondly as he thinks of all the ways he is going to make Matthew Brown wish that he had died the moment that Hannibal slammed his skull against the corner of Fredrick Chilton's desk.

"Hannibal?"

He lifts his gaze up from Will at the sound of his name and is surprised to see that Alana is standing in the doorway, leaning her head against the frame and watching the two of them. He hadn't heard her knock… but then, perhaps she hadn't.

"Alana," Hannibal makes no move to get up from his chair at Will's bedside, but he does offer her a thin smile of welcome. As little as he wanted her company to intrude on the quiet serenity of this moment, turning her away would be too suspicious to allow. "Please, come in. Is Agent Crawford going to be joining us, as well?"

"That was the plan until he found out that Chilton woke up a few hours ago, so he had to go speak to him first." Alana's voice is whisper soft as she takes her first steps into the room. So quiet that even the *hiss* of the door gently closing behind her seems like a shout. "He wanted to come right here and see how Will was doing, first, but…"

"Fredrick is awake and can give a statement about the events of yesterday morning," Hannibal surmises, idly brushing his thumb against the back of Will's hand. "Will is not and therefore cannot. Protocol must take priority over personal feelings; I'm sure Will would understand that."

"I'm sure he would too," Alana agrees, but he doesn't meet Hannibal's eyes. She's gazing at Will, instead, which is part of the reason it seems so abrupt when she changes the subject. "Hannibal, do you need to talk?"

Hannibal blinks slowly. “I have already given my statement to Agent Crawford. We spoke last night, while Will was in surgery. I told him all that I knew.”

“I didn’t mean in an official capacity. I meant as friends. I was just thinking… protocol taking priority over personal feelings, and all.”

“Perhaps it is the fact that I did not sleep last night, but I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

Alana shuffles her feet awkwardly before finally meeting Hannibal’s gaze. Her teeth worry over her bottom lip.

“You’re holding his hand.”

Hannibal looks down where his and Will’s fingers are still intertwined. “Yes, I am. Are you worried it is hurting him? I can assure you; he’s not feeling much of anything with as much morphine as they’ve given him.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Alana folds her arms over her chest and straightens her spine, something that she often does in the moments before she is prepared to administer a scolding. “You seem attached to him.”

“A simple illusion,” Hannibal says, quietly amused by the flicker of jealousy in her eyes. He wonders who it’s for; if she resents the memory of affection that he never noticed or if she’s angry that Will is likely to never trust her or want her touch again after all that she has helped put him through. “I can remove my hand at any moment. We’ve hardly been sutured together.”

“Hannibal,” Alana’s lips press into a tight line. “I’m serious.”

She never did find much to laugh about. Always a little too serious; a little too keen on the broken parts of the world, frightened by what she couldn’t understand and angry at what could not be taught.

“I believe you are. However, I fail to see what you find offensive about it. Will was confused when he woke from his surgery. He did not seem to know where he was or how he had gotten there. I imagine, to him, it had only been seconds since he was in danger, not hours. For his own safety, he was given another sedative – a milder one than they used for surgery, only meant to help him fall back asleep. But, to a frightened mind, the differences between help and harm are hard to discern. He had no way of knowing what our intentions were. He needed reassurance and he held his hand out to me. I took it. Physical contact is a simple human need. It’s hardly out of line for me to comfort him.”

“I just know how easy it is to look at Will and think that he needs your protection. That he’s broken and only you can fix him.”

Hannibal frowns thoughtfully. “Is that what you believe I feel, or is it what you felt for him?”

“Either. Both.” Alana’s arms don’t relax. “He can’t help what he brings out in people. It’s so easy to look at him and think that you’re seeing some missing part of your own heart,

because he just unconsciously reflects everything you feel and does it so well that you forget you're not looking at a reflection."

"This is a conversation that we are having as friends?" the question is carefully chosen. "Not colleagues?"

Alana almost smiles at that. "Completely off the record. I'm not even wearing a wire."

"Then, as your friend… I believe that when you look at Will, you are still seeing the reflection of yourself. But now that it is no longer the best of you, as he saw it, but the worst of what you have done to him, you will begin to attempt to overcompensate to ease your burden of guilt." Hannibal doesn't raise his voice, doesn't change his inflection… but he supposes he may as well have, for the way that Alana's lips part in shock and then outrage. "You will attempt to rewrite a history of hurt with the words of your love language, doing anything and everything to make it up to him. Including warning other people from your mistakes. But I am not a reflection of you. My actions will be entirely my own. All mistakes brand new."

Hannibal's never been one to mince words, not even with a friend. And she must know that by now, but Alana sniffles at his wounding confirmation of her fears all the same and crosses her arms a little tighter, as if to keep herself from falling into the halves that Matthew Brown tried to cut Will into.

"This is all my fault, isn't?" a tear rolls down her cheek and she rubs her face against her shoulder to clear it, unwilling to let go of herself. "He wouldn't have even been in the BSHCI if I hadn't gone to Jack. If I had just talked things out with him again, then maybe we could have figured things out. But he was acting so erratically and he… he was scaring me. I didn't know what he would do if he thought I was starting to suspect him. And now he's here, and I…"

"Alana," Hannibal interrupts, gently. "I cannot absolve you of your guilt anymore than I can condemn your actions. It is not my place. Perhaps this would be better saved for another time, when Will is cognizant of your sorrow and able to judge for himself whether you can be forgiven by him."

Alana finally uncrosses her arms to rub a little harder at her face, her cheeks turning ruddy with the force of it. "I know. I know, I do. It just keeps spilling out. I haven't been able to stop crying since Jack called me."

"An understandable reaction to have."

"I just don't want him to get hurt again. He trusted us. He trusted *me.* And I said that I understood what I really couldn't. I said I could handle what I never had a grasp on. And you… well, you have a habit of keeping people at arm's length." There's that hint of a bitterness never quite faded. He can almost see the bright eyes of a young woman just learning her trade, looking up at him as if he hung the moon. Loving him as if he were the sun, never aware of the shadows that he cast. "I don't know how good of an idea it is for you to be so involved in his recovery process. He's going to need someone he can really lean on.

And he'll want it to be you. He already doesn't feel like he has anyone else. If you're there one day and then gone the next, I don't know what will happen."

It won't happen, is what Hannibal wants to say. If Alana had any idea just how much he craves Will's presence… how much he's willing to do to ensure that Will doesn't just want Hannibal to be the guiding force in his life but to *need* it like the very air he breathes… well, this would be a different conversation.

"I keep students, patients, and colleagues at a distance for the same reason. Professionalism cannot be compromised. It can be temporarily placed on a shelf for the sake of a simple conversation," Hannibal allows himself to smile as he appraises her. "But it cannot ever be forgotten. When you allow those lines to blur, you cannot control the mess that it makes. However, Will Graham is none of these things to me."

"If he's not a patient, what is he?"

Hannibal looks back down at Will, watching the way his eyes move beneath the lids, deep in the thrall of sleep. Likely having pleasant, morphine-tinged dreams.

"A friend."

(***)

Will is just a feather.

A feather drifting down, down, down, *dooooown* from the heights of oblivion, falling slowly into his body again, gradually remembering the feeling of his fingers, toes, legs, and arms. All of which seem to be present and accounted for. He experimentally twitches his fingers and then cracks one eye open look blearily around his surroundings. And, for a second, he wonders if he's on a cloud.

Everything is white. The air glows and shimmers in every direction that he turns his gaze. And, truthfully, he's never been more comfortable in his life. He's certain that he's lighter than air, floating high above anything that could hurt him. Safe, protected… and really, really, *really* fucking happy.

So maybe he is on a cloud. This could be heaven, as he had always imagined it when he and his dad would go to church on Christmas, for the gifts that they gave to poor families like them. He used to love the idea of God; like to think there was someone bigger and more powerful than him who could stop anyone who would ever try to hurt him if Will would just ask. He hadn't thought about God for a long time, maybe a life spent tracking down evil people had earned him a place here, where everything sparkles.

He manages to turn his head and realizes that there is someone else in this cloud with him. A woman with pale blonde hair, dressed in all blue. Sky-blue.

"Are you an angel?" He manages to croak out, curious.

The woman turns her head, a surprised smile upturning her mouth. “Oh! Dr. Graham, you’re awake. Perfect timing, Dr. Lecter just got here.”

Oh.

Oh.

That sours his good mood a little. If he’s in heaven, then he must have died. Died while Matthew Brown was cutting his body into pieces. And he doesn’t mind the fact that he’s dead or the fact that a serial killer is digesting his body (really, he doesn’t. It’s hard to be upset about anything when everything feels this good) but he does mind the idea that Dr. Lecter is here with him. Because he’s pretty sure that dying is the only way to get to heaven and if Hannibal is here, that means Matthew Brown killed him too.

The concern must show on his face, because the angel wearing the sky comes a little closer, looking at something next to him.

“Your vitals are holding steady. That’s good. How are you feeling, Dr. Graham? Any pain?”

That is a silly question if he has ever heard one. “Nope.”

He pops the “p”… then starts to laugh at the echo it makes in his ears and can’t help but do it again, laughing harder the second time. Now that’s when things start to feel uncomfortable. Not quite painful… just a ghost’s kiss of an ache. Barely there, but still noticeable.

“I’ll go let Dr. Lecter know that you’re awake.”

Will holds one hand up to his head and gives her a little salute, since he’s not really sure how else to address an angel. “You’re the boss.”

Her answering smile is as radiant as it is amused. Her hair sparkles like everything else as she turns, reflecting the light, but she doesn’t get far before the door opens.

“Oh! Dr. Lecter,” her voice changes. She sounds infa… infact? Infur… Will scrunches up his nose, trying and failing to remember the word. She sounds turned on, his mind substitutes. “I was just on my way to come and get you. Dr. Graham just woke up…”

She lowers her voice to a whisper, but Will can still hear her.

“And he’s a little out of it. Seems like the morphine is doing its job. Oh! Look at that! You’re such a cutie!”

Whoa. That was forward of her. Should he try getting off this cloud to give them some privacy? Two slow blinks later, he finds himself trying to turn in the direction opposite of them and whatever she saw to make her *squeal* like that, but he doesn’t get far.

“Will,” a quiet voice in his ear follows the gentle but firm grasp on his arm and he’s pulled to lie on his back again. “I know you may not feel like it, but you are still injured. Try not to move.”

Hannibal Lecter is standing over him. He's much more solid than anything else in the room and the suit he wears is dark enough that it doesn't reflect the light and hurt Will's eyes so much.

"Oh, hey doc." Will tries to peer past him. "Where did your antlers go?"

"I'm sorry?"

Will frowns. That should be his line, shouldn't it? "No, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to come here with me. I mean, I didn't mind dying so much. Probably better off this way. But you had a whole life to live. Had things going for you. I assume, anyway. I guess I didn't ask much about you. That was rude of me."

Understanding brightens Hannibal's expression but it's quickly smoothed over by something that looks like fondness. "Ah. Well, I am sorry to disappoint you, Will, but you haven't died. And neither have I. You're in the hospital."

"But I feel great. I'm pretty sure this is heaven. There was even an angel here a minute ago."

"That will be the morphine." Hannibal brushes some of Will's hair from his eyes. It feels nice and Will leans his head closer to the feeling, smiling when the doctor does it again. "And, I assume, the nurse. This may seem like heaven, but that's only to stop you from feeling things that may, well, hurt like hell."

"So…Matthew didn't kill me?"

Hannibal's hand stills. "No. Mr. Brown did not kill you."

"Did he, um…" It's an awkward question to ask, even with as great as he's feeling. "Did he eat any of me?"

"No." Hannibal moves his hand back from Will's face and Will can see him better for it. He realizes that the doctor is frowning, now. "He did not. Will… how much do you remember?"

"Not a lot," Will reaches to rub at his eyes, trying to will himself to feel more centered with reality, but it stays just out of reach. He can't feel anything but singularly delighted. "Um, Matthew came to get me from my cell… we went to Chilton's office. But he had a gun. Matthew, I mean. Not Chilton. But he stabbed me and said he wanted to eat me because he loved me? And shot Chilton? Or maybe he shot him first and then stabbed me? Did he say that he loved me?"

It all comes out as a question. The memories are a tangled mass in his mind, things coming to him out of order and feeling just as unreal as everything else surrounding him. He knows, in his gut, that Matthew tried to kill him. But how it happened might as well have been a dream for all that he could remember about it.

"I don't…" Will presses his fingers a little harder into his eyes. Trying to feel pain. Trying to break through the fog. "I can't… I remember, I just can't figure out what order it happened in. I just need a second to… to…"

Hannibal pulls Will's hands from his eyes. "I shouldn't have asked. It's too soon and you need more time to recover. You'll do plenty of reliving when you have to talk to Agent Crawford… but, for right now, you need your rest."

"I just woke up," Will squints at Hannibal, suddenly remembering – "I woke up before. You had them sedate me. Are you going to do that again?"

"Not if I don't have to," Hannibal's answering smile is faint, but it brightens his eyes. "If you promise to take things slowly and stop trying to get out of this bed, then I will have no need to."

"You also said that you'd be right here the whole time," Will remembers that, too, and his tone becomes accusatory. "And you weren't. You left. Kind of hard to make promises to a man who doesn't keep them."

"A fair point," Hannibal concedes. "But it was a matter of necessity. And you did sleep through most of my absence."

"Promise breaker." Will says, childishly. And simply because he doesn't have the soundness of mind to be embarrassed, he sticks his tongue out at him too.

"Why don't you see what I've brought you before you decide to judge me too harshly, hm?"

Hannibal turns away from him, for a minute, and Will has to resist the urge to try to sit up, but he does crane his head to attempt to get a better look at what he's doing. It takes a minute, but Hannibal turns back around with a black bag in his hand. From within it, he removes two bowls, each with lids attached. He opens one and an aroma that Will would risk calling *heavenly* fills the air.

"Smells delicious."

Hannibal smiles, looking pleased. "Silkie chicken in a broth. A black boned bird prized in China for its medicinal value since the 7th century. With wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates and star anise."

"…You made me chicken soup?"

Hannibal's smile fades. A pained look crosses his face, as if he can't believe someone would liken his culinary masterpiece to something so banal as chicken soup.

"Yes."

Will grins, even as Hannibal continues to look miffed. "No one's ever done that for me before. Thank you."

Some of the ice in Hannibal's expression thaws right back out again. And Will makes a mental note, just in case he sees much more of the doctor after all of this – Hannibal likes to be complimented.

“When I saw what they served in the cafeteria, I knew that it would be inhumane to allow them to force you to digest it. Especially in your condition.” Hannibal sets both bowls on the table. “And, since I needed to run an errand anyway… I decided to kill two birds with one stone.”

“You slaughtered your own chickens?” Will pretends to gape at him. “That’s hardcore.”

Hannibal’s smile is all teeth. “I am very careful about what I put in my body. That means preparing all of my own meals and, yes, overseeing the butchering process of any animal I plan to eat.”

“There’s probably a diagnosis for that,” Will hums and closes his eyes again. Everything still feels sparkly, but he feels more… reality adjacent. “Something long and hard to say.”

Hard to say…

“Infatuated!” Will’s eyes snap back open. “That’s what it was.”

Hannibal looks startled by his sudden outburst. “Will?”

“The an – the nurse,” Will amends, realizing that the angel in question was probably not actually a holy creature like he had assumed. “When she was talking to you, she sounded infatuated. I couldn’t remember the right word for it. But I just got it. I think she has a crush on you, Dr. Lecter. I mean, she did call you cute.”

Hannibal turns his head back to the soup and Will can’t be sure, but it almost seems like he’s smiling again.

“I hate to disappoint you for a second time, Will, but I was not actually who she was referring to. But, this is as good a time as any to show you what else I’ve brought for you.”

“…is it the surviving chicken?”

Hannibal doesn’t dignify that comment with an answer, though he does shoot Will a very dry look as he crosses the room. He opens the door and steps out into the hallway, leaving Will to stare out after him with open curiosity. It takes a minute, but Hannibal returns before Will can start to feel too antsy, leash in hand.

Will’s curious gaze follows it and then his eyes immediately smart with tears. “Harley?!”

At the sound of her name, Harley’s tail begins to wag earnestly. But five months apart is not time long enough to make her forget her training and she keeps all four feet on the floor, walking politely as Hannibal leads her over to the bed. She sits beside him and Will reaches over the side, tentatively touching her head; terrified that the slightest of contact with pop this vision like a soap bubble and that she’ll disappear.

She doesn’t. Her fur is soft and warm under his touch and it’s all Will can do not to throw himself out of the bed and wrap his arms around her. As it is, his vision blurs as his tears start to shed in earnest.

“Harley,” he says again, his voice rough with emotion. “Hey, girl. I missed you so much.”

He looks back up at Hannibal and wipes at his eyes with his free hand. “How did you…?”

“I asked Dr. Bloom what became of your dogs. She told me that they had been taken to a shelter – several of them were adopted out, with their relation to you omitted. But two of them had not been.”

A feeling like ice settles into Will’s veins at the word “shelter”. Pain cuts through the euphoria of the morphine, ripping through him like Matthew’s knife had. He grits his teeth and stares down at Harley, who looks up at him with the unrelenting trust and love that he’s come to expect from dogs and tries not to scream.

Once the urge passes, he looks back up. “My other dog?”

“He’s at my home.”

There is the slightest hint of discontent in Hannibal’s voice. He’s not a dog person, Will doesn’t even have to look him in the eyes to know that. Hannibal cooks all of his own food, gets mad when simple terms like “chicken soup” are used, and wears suits that probably cost more than Will’s house. He probably wouldn’t even own a cat for fear of shedding fur.

And he went to a shelter, knowing what a mess Will was and being uncertain how his pets would act or behave, and he brought them back with him anyway.

“I bathed them both when I brought them back to my home. They needed it,” his distaste is a little more evident. “I was able to bring Harley here to see you because she is a registered service dog. Winston, however, is spending this time getting used to the guestroom that you will be using. I have Alana watching him, for the moment. She was… eager to have something to do.”

Will tilts his head back. Looks at the ceiling so he doesn’t have the chance to pull a face and make Hannibal think that he doesn’t appreciate this. Because he does, beyond what he could possibly express with words. It’s just… Alana. And his only remaining dogs. But Winston knows her, and Will is almost positive she wouldn’t do anything to hurt him.

And, at least if she’s at Hannibal’s home, she can’t be here. Checking on him. Worrying about him. Fussing over him.

“Thank you,” Will says, looking back at Hannibal. “I… I don’t know what to say. I never thought I’d see any of them again.”

“It was my pleasure,” Hannibal grabs one of the bowls of soup and holds it out to Will, who takes it without a second thought. “I had intended to surprise you with them when you were released but plans often change.”

“I’ve never needed Harley more than now,” Will murmurs, looking down at the dog who was still sitting patiently beside him. Maybe things did work out the way they were supposed to. Why else would Harley be one of the only two left behind? He contemplates sneaking her a

bite of chicken… but he's a little too aware of Hannibal's eyes on him, so he just eats a spoonful himself… and then moans a little. "Holy shit, Hannibal, this might be the best thing I've ever put in my mouth."

"Highest praise," Hannibal says, dryly, though he looks pleased. "Eat and then it's right back to resting for you. You'll need your strength – Agent Crawford will have more than his fair share of questions for you in the coming days. I suspect I'll only have luck holding him off this evening."

"Thanks," Will murmurs, in between taking another mouthful of the soup.

It tastes as good as the morphine is still making him feel; so good that it's a little hard to imagine or even remember that he's supposed to be in pain. Supposed to be recovering. He takes another bite and then frowns, something niggling in the back of his mind. Something that he thinks he should remember but can't quite grasp.

It comes to him slowly. "…You were there."

Hannibal says nothing, but Will can feel him waiting.

"In Chilton's office," Will continues. "I remember seeing you standing in the doorway. Then you ran at Matthew and… you hurt him. You threw him? And you had… antlers."

It sounds ridiculous even as he says it and Will stares into the depths of his soup so that he doesn't have to see the pity or concern of insanity on Hannibal's face.

"But maybe I just dreamed that."

"I was there," Hannibal says, drawing Will's gaze back to him. "I arrived to collect you at ten, as promised, and I caught Matthew Brown in the act. I did… hurt him, to save you. However, the antlers?"

Will's cheeks burn.

"You lost a lot of blood, Will. And you are currently on a great deal of pain medication. Matthew Brown inflicted great violence on you and your body and mind have not started to fully process that trauma. It stands to reason that some things would not process correctly. Give yourself time to heal and perhaps you will remember the moment as it was, not as your brain perceived it to be in order to protect itself."

"Yeah, maybe." Will sighs and stirs a cluster of berries around in his soup, suddenly feeling a lot less hungry. "They were pretty, though."

Interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dr. Hannibal Lecter lives on the most coveted streets in all of Baltimore; a long, winding stretch of pure luxury known as Blythewood Rd. where each Georgian style estate that cast its shadow over Jack Crawford's unmarked sedan came with large, gorgeous yards that had never seen a day of child's play and greenery that was elegantly landscaped to optimize privacy. It's exactly the kind of place that Jack had always envisioned he would live, someday. The life that he had promised Bella that he would give her, when they met in Italy all those years ago, and while he had long since given up those fanciful dreams and learned to live and love with what he had… seeing this, now, only serves to agitate the already sour pit in his stomach.

Dr. Lecter's 2003 Bentley Arnage T is nowhere to be seen; possibly parked inside of the garage… but also possibly indicating that he's just not home and, for a minute, Jack curses his own hasty decisions. When Alana had confirmed for him that Hannibal was not at the hospital with Will, he had assumed he could find the doctor here; get him alone long enough to have a conversation with.

He hadn't factored in the possibility of Hannibal running errands. But it's too late now to figure out what he'll do if the doctor isn't home. He'll just think on his feet. He climbs out of his car and pulls out his badge, ready to flash it at anyone who might feel brave enough to come and question what he was doing, then jogs up the walk to the front door.

He rings the doorbell twice. And waits.

And waits.

…And waits.

Just as Jack is considering ringing the bell a third time, the door finally opens and Hannibal steps into view, a welcoming smile on his face.

"Good evening, Agent Crawford." Hannibal's polite smile falters. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure? Is Will alright?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, Dr. Lecter, Will is perfectly fine." Jack tries to smile reassuringly, but it feels phony even to the muscles in his face that are making the gesture. Calculated. He drops the expression. "I apologize for dropping in on you like this, unannounced, but I wanted to talk to you about a few things. May I come in?"

"Of course."

Hannibal steps to the side, allowing Jack to better see the immaculate foyer and making him regret that he had turned Hannibal down on his offer for breakfast the first time that they met.

It's… lavish. Clearly, the doctor has the kind of money that most people could only dream of.

"Shoes off, if you please."

Jack nods and follows the dress code, leaving his shoes by the door and hanging his coat up on the rack. Sufficiently underdressed, he starts to follow Hannibal deeper into his home as he beckons.

"That way to the sitting room," Hannibal gestures to a hallway that offshoots from the foyer. "I'll join you in a moment – would you care for some wine, Agent?"

"Oh, sure. That would be lovely, thank you."

Jack's pretty sure he's bitten into plastic that felt more natural against his teeth than the words leaving his mouth and he grimaces at himself when he faces away from the doctor and heads down the hall as directed. While he's almost positive that butter wouldn't melt in Hannibal Lecter's mouth, his own was hot with the temper he never quite got under control. Manners, brown-nosing, rubbing elbows with higher ups and kissing their asses had never been on his to-do list. It'd cost him more than a few promotions in the FBI; he could be twice as far as he was now if he had relied on smooth talking as much as he had his own skill. Maybe have a house like this…

But it's not who he is. Never has been. And if Alana hadn't been so firm on the fact that Hannibal doesn't tolerate bad manners when she first recommended him, Jack wouldn't be fucking bothering with any of it. He'd have said no to the drink, made the point that he came to make, and be on his way back home to his wife already.

Hannibal arrives with two glasses and a bottle. He hands both glasses to Jack, who holds them carefully as Hannibal pours.

"A 2005 Domaine De La Romanée-Conti Romanée-Saint-Vivant Marey Monge Grand Cru. Domaine de la Romanée-Conti is Burgundy's most famous estate, producing all grand cru wines from twenty-five hectares of vines. Only natural yeasts are used, and the aging is done in 100% new oak." Hannibal intones. "The wines are produced in extremely limited quantities, making them quite the jewel to collectors. But I don't see the allure of owning something so precious and simply locking it away."

Taking his glass from Jack's hand, he moves to sit on the armchair and twirls his glass, opening it to the air and Jack takes advantage of the silence.

"You are clearly a man with a refined palette. I'm almost worried that this will be wasted on me," Jack says, hoping that the flattery doesn't sound too obvious.

"Nothing is ever wasted if it is enjoyed." Hannibal responds. In the low light of the room, his eyes are almost as dark and richly red as the wine in the glass that he brings up to his lips. He takes a drink and then continues. "May I ask what you would like to speak to me about, or shall we wait until our tongues have been loosened?"

Jack doesn't need to beat around the bush. Not with this. "It's about Will Graham."

“It often is,” Hannibal says, sounding amused even as his expression doesn’t change. “He has become quite the topic of conversation in my life.”

“As he has in mine.” Jack agrees, pressing on. “Alana tells me that you’re still planning to take Will in as a guest in your home. You do know that it’s no longer necessary, Dr. Lecter? His safety is no longer an issue. As soon as he comes out of his coma, Matthew Brown will be taken into custody. The next time he’ll see the inside of the BSHCI, it’ll be as a patient; not an employee.”

“I’m pleased to hear that the situation is under control. However, there is the matter of the Ripper…” Hannibal looks at Jack and trails off, suddenly thoughtful. Jack wonders what his expression gave away. “Ah, I see. You believe that Matthew Brown is the Ripper?”

Damn psychologists.

“It’s a working theory,” Jack admits, reluctantly. No point in lying. “Unofficial, as of right now. I have my people going over the evidence left behind at the latest Ripper kill. A boot print was found where the bodies were, after they were removed. We’re waiting for a warrant to be issued before we can scope out his home and see if he brought home any dirt from the crime scene on the bottom of his boots. Placing him there, along with the fact that he shot Chilton and tried to *eat* Will Graham is as good as a confession.”

“The Ripper has never shot his victims before, has he?” Hannibal’s thoughtful tone is still there. “Why the sudden change?”

“Don’t be coy, doctor. You were in the room when Graham told us what happened – Matthew Brown was in love with him, but he was losing him fast. Whatever else he might be, Graham is his own man. You could hold him at gunpoint and tell him to say that he loves you, but he wouldn’t do it if he didn’t feel it. Rejection is a bitch, doctor. It’s not implausible to think that he realized he was losing control of the situation and had to act fast. There wasn’t time for the usual theatrics.”

“Be that as it may, there are other factors in my decision to go ahead with the plan to have Will stay with me.”

“Such as?”

“His injury, for one.” Hannibal leans forward and Jack can see worry in his expression. “Just because he is fit to be released from the hospital, tomorrow, does not mean that he’s fully recovered. He will need more time and more care. I’ve spoken to him about it and he agreed that he would prefer to have my assistance than that of a stranger.”

Jack was afraid of that.

Terrified, even, because Will Graham was about to slip beyond a veil that Jack could not reach through. If Graham was a teacher, if he was struggling to scrape by with no interpersonal skills and living in a one-room house with up to ten dogs, he was available. Easy access. He would always need the money and he would always cave to the cause. Getting him to come back to the field… well, it would have been possible. Graham would

resist but he would get bored, or he would start to realize that he has human needs, and he would sign on for one case and then another.

And Jack? He'd take miles from every inch that Will gave. He knows that truth about himself; that insistent voice that believes the ends justify the means and that one man's life is a worthy price to pay to save thousands of others. He would drag Will Graham back into the world that almost broke him because he's the best at what he does, and he *will* save lives.

But that all hinges on necessity. Looking around this room, which is only one of many in an entire estate, he knows damn well that there's nothing that Hannibal Lecter couldn't prove for Will. He wouldn't leave one weakness for Jack to exploit.

There's only one thing left that Jack could do and he's already resigned himself to a long eternity spent burning in hell for the way that he's willing to use the bodies of agents to shield the innocence of civilians, so there's nothing stopping him now.

"Well, as long as you're not just bringing him here because you're worried about the Ripper," Jack smiles and even that feels like a lie. "Then, I don't have any reason to argue with you on it. It might even be good for him. Staying with a licensed psychiatrist."

"He would not be my patient," Hannibal says, smoothly side-stepping any implications of professional boundaries being crossed. "But, as his friend, I would certainly be willing to listen to whatever worries he has."

"And he may have his fair share," Jack takes a gulp of wine to steel himself. "I plan to ask him to come back to the field."

If this surprises, shocks, or even angers Dr. Lecter, it doesn't show on his face. He remains unsettlingly neutral. "Are you sure that's a question that you want to ask?"

"Want has nothing to do with it," Jack licks his lips and swallows hard before continuing. "I need to. No one picks apart or rebuilds a crime scene like he does. Dr. Lecter… when we first met, you told me you felt that it was a civic duty to keep dangerous criminals where they belong. Do you still feel that way?"

"Certainly."

"Then will you help me get Will back on the horse?" Jack asks, before he can talk himself out of it. "No one is better at that particular civic duty than he is."

"I will not," Hannibal says, simply.

Jack gapes at him. "Dr. Lecter, I don't think you realize…"

"I do," Hannibal interrupts smoothly. "The world is a dangerous place full of people who should be locked away for the sake of polite society. However, Will was on death's doorstep just five days ago. He is not physically, mentally, or emotionally ready to return to the life he led before."

“I’ve got seven girls from seven different Minnesota campuses abducted in the last seven months,” Jack grinds out. “Gone on Friday, reported missing by Monday. Whoever is doing this is going to strike again and soon. I need a mind like Graham’s to save the next one. And I think it would be easier for him if you were there to help support him.”

“I will support any decision he makes,” Hannibal says, firmly. “But it must be his decision. I will not encourage him to return to the life that nearly killed him.”

“Even if it’ll save a young woman’s life?” Jack challenges, practically baring his teeth.

He knows that he’s taking a step too close to rudeness, and that he should be grateful that Hannibal isn’t set on discouraging Will any more than he plans to encourage him. But something about Lecter’s gaze riles him up; like he knows the shame at the very center of himself is being seen. At least when Will Graham stares at him, he’s feeling whatever he can find in the depths of him.

But when Hannibal Lecter does it, Jack gets the sense that the doctor not only sees the truth of him but thinks very little of him for it.

“I don’t care about any of them,” Hannibal says, plainly. “Their lives are not my concern. Will Graham’s is.”

And Jack wishes there was something stronger in his glass than just wine.

(***)

Will can smell Hannibal before he can see that he’s in the room… or, more aptly, he can smell *breakfast*. The scent of sausage is thick in the air, and he looks up from the book he’d been pretending to read while one of the nurses was checking his vitals for what would be the final time.

“You know they’re letting me out today, right?”

“Good morning to you too, Will.”

Will smiles sheepishly. “Okay, sorry. Good morning.”

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It replenishes your glucose levels to boost your energy. The danger of you succumbing to sepsis has passed, but you have a great deal of healing left still do to. You will need your energy.” Hannibal says, as he pushes the bowl into Will’s hands. “A little protein scramble to start the day. Some eggs, some sausage.”

Will pokes at the scramble with his fork, a sly smile upturning one corner of his mouth. “What kind of eggs?”

Hannibal does not miss the look on Will’s face, and his eyes narrow even as he explains. “Duck eggs. Not only do they have more nutrients than chicken eggs, but they have a richer taste.”

“And the sausage?”

“Blood sausage. Very rich and high in iron.” Hannibal brings his index finger to Will’s chin and uses it to tilt his head back. “What are you smiling about?”

Will’s grin widens. “I was just curious what your basis for little was. I’m kind of surprised there’s not edible gold in this.”

“Edible gold has no nutritional value and adds nothing to the flavour of a dish. It’s simply ostentatious. I prefer to create style with substance.” Hannibal taps his index finger against Will’s mouth before stepping back. “Now, eat.”

Hannibal turns around to start collecting the books that he had brought in for Will to read when he had started to go stir crazy and was sick of every local channel being interrupted by news and speculation about the Ripper. While he’s distracted, he fishes a piece of sausage out of the bowl and starts to move to drop it over the side of the bed for Harley, who lies dutifully at its side.

“Do not feed your breakfast to the dog.”

Will jerks his hand back. “How do you do that?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer and Will pops the sausage into his mouth instead, unable to stop the appreciative moan that builds up in his throat at the burst of flavour that explodes against his tongue as soon as his teeth break through the skin of it. He swallows quickly and scoops up a bigger forkful of it, watching as Hannibal makes quick work of collecting everything.

“I’m surprised Jack isn’t here,” Will murmurs, for the sake of conversation since he feels a little useless just sitting there, in bed, watching as Hannibal tidies up his mess. “Making me run through my story one last time before I’m officially no longer tied to the state in any capacity and free to run away to Aruba if I want.”

“I asked him not to come,” Hannibal couldn’t be more blasé if he tried. “He and I had a conversation last night and he agreed that it was best if he made his presence publicly known in a different direction, away from you. There are several reporters who are interested in speaking with you, now that word has gotten out about the attack. They’ll follow him and be none the wiser until well after we’ve gotten you out of this hospital.”

“I didn’t realize you two were all that close,” Will murmurs, a little apprehensive now. Hannibal’s done nothing to make him doubt his intentions… but anything concerning Jack Crawford is enough to twist his stomach so hard that the stitches pop out.

“We are not. However, I have already accepted the fact that the price of your friendship is Jack Crawford’s prying interest into all facets of your life, including mine.” Once all the books are tucked away, Hannibal pulls out a neatly folded stack of clothes and places them on the edge of the hospital bed. For him, Will assumes. “He had some concerns about you coming to stay with me.”

Will’s nostrils flare as anger pulses through him. “He doesn’t get to be concerned about me or what I do.”

“We cannot help our concern for those we care about. Even in the aftermath of mistakes we have made. Our loved one’s pain becomes our pain. We carry it with us, even if we have caused it.”

Will gestures at Hannibal with his fork. “You are giving him way too much credit. What else did he have to say?”

Hannibal hesitates… then shakes his head. “We can discuss it later, if you’d like. But for now, your food is getting cold. Finish your breakfast so that we can go home.”

It… it does a funny thing to Will’s chest; hearing Hannibal call it “home” for both of them with such earnest. An unexpected warmth blooms inside of him, one he thinks he doesn’t deserve, so he immediately rejects it. “So, we can go to your home, you mean.”

“My home is your home, Will. For as long as you like it.”

The sincerity is Hannibal’s gaze is too much. Will shoves another forkful of food into his mouth and tries not to read too much into it, thinking of how nice it’ll be to see Winston, again, instead.

Chapter End Notes

Let's all try to act normal in the comments today. <3

Chapter 15

Will darts out of the car like a shot, his seatbelt undone and his body halfway out the door before Hannibal has put it entirely in park, feet hitting the concrete floor of the garage with all the intensity of a drumline, and he *throws* himself onto the ground with an exuberant cry of victory.

“Winston!”

It’s all Hannibal can do not to shout after him, though surprise does make his heartrate pick up speed. He pulls his keys from the ignition and slips them into his pocket before *dashing* after the boy that’s currently rolling on the ground with sixty-six pounds of mutt wrapped up in his arms.

“*William,*” His name comes out as a hiss between Hannibal’s teeth. “Your stitches!”

“Worth it,” is Will’s distinctly muffled response as he buries his face against Winston’s neck and curls his fingers in the dog’s long fur. “I missed you so much, buddy.”

It’s too difficult to stay angry with him, so Hannibal turns his ire to the culprit behind the dog’s sudden appearance: Alana, who is still standing in the doorway with her lips rounded out in an “O” of surprise. She flushes when she meets Hannibal’s gaze.

“He, um… heard the car,” Alana says, lifting her shoulders in a delicate shrug. “I think he knew, somehow, that it was Will because he just took off. I was scared he was going to start scratching up your door.”

Hannibal grimaces at the thought as he pulls open the back door and allows Harley to climb out. She’s much more dignified than her brother; trotting over calmly to Will’s side and standing silent guard.

Hannibal follows closely after and gently disentangles Will from Winston, pulling him back up to his feet and immediately reaching to feel his abdomen. Checking for blood or signs of torn stitches.

“If you liked the hospital so much, we could have stayed.” Hannibal tells him, his voice only a little irritated.

“I’m fine,” Will defends his actions with an airy wave… but some of that good humour slips from his expression as he turns to look at Alana, who is still standing awkwardly in the doorway. “…Thanks for watching them.”

“Hannibal asked me to,” Alana said.

It sounds like an apology, an accusation, and a plea all at once. Her complex feelings for Will haven’t settled yet and the rest of Hannibal’s annoyance at how easily Will threw himself into harms way melts at the thought that there might be a breakdown to witness, yet. He’s always

been curious about what would rise from the ashes if someone pushed Dr. Bloom far enough for her to crash and burn… but never so much that he devoted time to it.

It's lovely when things happen naturally.

"I know," Will says, his expression hardening. "If it had be me, they probably would have ended back up in a shelter."

Hurt crosses Alana's face. "I didn't put them there."

"You didn't stop it from happening." Will mutters. He turns his head and looks to Hannibal, gesturing to the doorway that Alana is still standing in. "Can I…?"

Hannibal would be lying if he said that he didn't take pleasure in how Will's voice softened when he addressed him. "Of course. I will be right in after you."

Alana steps out of the way and Will stomps past her without a second glance, both dogs on his heels.

"…That could have gone better," Alana murmurs, stepping into the garage and closing the door behind her. She crosses her arms over her chest and swallows hard. "At least he was happy to see Winston."

"Will is experiencing many complicated emotions right now," Hannibal says, quietly. "His life has been out of his own control for some time now and every minute that he feels that he is not in charge of his own future is another moment of resentment. I think, with time, the anger he feels will cool. Don't give up quite yet."

"I'm not giving up," Alana smiles sadly. "Just… dealing with the pain in the moment. I'm kind out of room for repression. I don't know how Jack does it – how he just moves forward without feeling anything about where he just came from."

"He told you that he wants Will to come back to work for him?" Hannibal surmises, noting how bitter the look in her eyes had become.

"Yes."

She cuts the word out with a snap of her teeth, her arms crossing tighter across her chest, as if imagining strangling Agent Crawford in the moment.

"He doesn't care about any of this. Not being wrong, not having hurt Will. As far as he's concerned, Will has been on a voluntary vacation and now it's time to get back to work."

"I must admit to some curiosity about the state of our criminal proceedings if the FBI's capacity to catch dangerous criminals rests on the availability of one man."

"Jack isn't completely helpless," Alana says, and Hannibal can't tell if she's defending or berating him. "He can do the work. It just… takes longer without Will. He makes jumps no one else can track and sees things that no one else even knows to look for. I think Jack just

got a little too used to relying on the shortcut method. Doing things without him just feels like it takes too long."

Hannibal does love it when the dominoes are set up perfectly for him. When all he has to do is knock them down. "Well, I suppose if he finds time to trust your recommendations again… you could tell him that I would be interested in lending my gaze to the case he brought up to me, before."

Alana's eyebrows furrow together. "Hannibal, I don't know if that's a good idea. I mean, I've consulted on a few cases for him. Drawn up profiles. It sticks with you, even if you don't feel things like Will does. There are people out there who are filled with so much violence and hatred… are you sure you could handle seeing it?"

"I am no stranger to displays of violence and hatred," Hannibal doesn't have it in him to be amused or touched by Alana's worry for him. It had been a private joke with himself, before, listening to these profilers and agents talk about seeing true evil, when they could look him in the eyes and see none of what he truly is. But now, with Will Graham being so near… and being so able to see past it all… it's just pathetic in a way. "And I would be happy to do it again, if it means that Jack Crawford keeps his distance from Will."

…An afterthought, then, thrown in for good measure. "And I cannot say that it would be unpleasant to work with you, again."

Alana flushes pink with pleasure at the flattery and absently curls a lock of hair around her index finger, teeth delicately biting into her bottom lip. "Well… I can bring it up. See if it's something he'll consider. I know that Will isn't replaceable, but the two of us might be a huge help."

"We've always worked well together before." Hannibal agrees, smiling thinly. "Give him my best, as well. I look forward to hearing from one of you on the matter, one way or the other… but, for now, I do have a tour to give."

"Oh!" Alana blinks, seeming to only just remember that Will Graham is not simply a concept, but a guest that Hannibal needs to be in the process of entertaining. "Of course. I should get going, anyway. Will wants space and I'm going to do my best to give it to him, whether I start doing field work again or not."

Her gaze lingers on Hannibal as she says, "I'm sure there's plenty of other things I can think of to keep myself occupied."

"You are a bright woman, Alana. I have no doubts."

(***)

“Okay, this is ridiculous.” Will throws his hands up into the air in a gesture of exasperation… which he immediately regrets, as the stitches in his stomach voice their disapproval of sudden, sharp movements. He’s slower about turning around to look at Hannibal, but the scowl on his face lasts the whole way through. “I can’t stay here.”

Hannibal frowns. “Is the room not to your satisfaction? I do have others.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?” Will asks, darkly, before looking back around the room that Hannibal told him would be *his* for as long as he wanted.

It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that it might be larger than the home he left behind in Virginia. And it’s *not* an exaggeration at all to say that it’s better furnished. To one side is a sitting area; complete with a small desk that housed a sleek and glossy-screened machine that couldn’t just be called a “computer”. Behind the desk is a luxurious leather rolling chair and to the right is a large wooden bookcase that bursts with more novels than Will thinks he could read in one lifetime. Just a few feet from the bookcase are a black leather armchair and a matching ottoman for a cozy reading space.

The other side of the room boasts two armoires, a single dresser, and a door that’s open just enough for Will to see that it leads into a private bathroom. And in the center of the room, standing as the barrier to divide these sections, is an enormous bed.

The flat screen on the wall is mounted just so that whether he would prefer to be sitting up or lying down, the view won’t be obstructed… and beneath it is a functional *fireplace,* with two plush dog beds in close proximity.

The entire room is warm. All natural, wooden tones that are enhanced by sunlight streaming in through a large window. It’s beautiful, it’s both sleek and rustic…

And it is completely unlike any other room in the house that Hannibal had shown him so far, where cooler tones and Danish modern styled furniture reigned supreme.

“Hannibal,” Will says, quietly, when Dr. Lecter doesn’t respond to his previous question. “Please don’t tell me that you redesigned an entire room for me.”

“As you wish,” Hannibal says. Smugness radiates off him like the electric hum of a live wire. “But it should be known that I would be willing to not tell you about another room should you prefer a different style. If I had redesigned this room, it would have been an educated guess of your preferences.”

“There are hotels with less luxurious accommodations,” Will closes his eyes and tilts his head back, trying to figure out how to berate him for doing something like this without sounding totally ungrateful. “Listen… you don’t have to bend over backwards and do things like this for me. Really. I would have been just fine sleeping on a couch in the basement. I am not worth the fuss of trying to impress.”

“Few people are,” Hannibal remarks, dryly, as he steps forward into the room as if to physically side-step Will’s self-deprecating remarks. “However, I would argue that you are worth the fuss of trying to make comfortable. As you are unable to safely take the stairs at

this moment, both the upper and the lower levels of my home are simply unavailable to you. This room should be as much as you need it to be to compensate for that fact."

Will huffs out a sigh at the earnest sincerity in Hannibal's voice. It… bothers him, thinking of Hannibal opening himself and his home up like up to anyone who might ask. At least Will has the common sense to know that this sort of luxury is not meant for someone like him and that it's definitely not normal for a guy who has only known for a little over a week to have completely rearranged part of his life for him.

Other people though? They might take one look at Hannibal's generosity and leech onto him. Suck him dry for everything he has. It makes Will's palms itch to strike out at the imaginary vultures and chase them away from Hannibal Lecter and his sincerity.

"It's really nice," Will says, because he doesn't want to make Hannibal think that he hates it… if only so Hannibal doesn't make good on the threat to try again with a different room. "Better than nice. There's a word for it that's outside of my vocabulary. But…"

He turns around and faces Hannibal, biting his tongue against the automatic impulse to recoil… and looks him in the eye.

"But." He starts again. "It's unnecessary. You're already doing enough for me. More than enough. This is… frosting on top of frosting on top of frosting. And you don't need to sweeten the deal that much for me. We're friends already."

"And friends don't allow friends to sleep on furniture in basements," Hannibal's sincerity is overwhelming him again. It's… weird, having someone do something for him without any obvious pretense. Kindness comes before favours, in Will's experience. It throws him off that Hannibal isn't asking for anything.

Rather than dig deeper into the conversation and make himself look like a jackass, Will sits on the edge of the bed and runs his hand over the soft down comforter.

"So," he says, switching topics. "What did you and Alana talk about in the garage?"

"You," Hannibal admits, with more ease than most people would. "She's… regretful of the actions she took that led you to end up where you were and uncertain how to proceed to atone for those mistakes. I suggested space, for now."

Will regrets asking. All the weird, bubbly feelings of uncertain happiness in the face of Hannibal's action pop in an instant and he's only left with his twisted, complicated feelings about Alana.

"I don't suppose she could just go live on the moon for a while?" Will asks, only half-joking. "That's about the level of space I need from her, right now. I… I know she feels bad, but I kinda don't care. I think I want her to feel bad. Worse than bad, really. I almost died. And she says she's sorry, but how is that supposed to fix anything?"

"Apologies are rarely meant to fix anything, Will. We say that we're sorry because convention dictates it. Words are their own, living things and they can create and they can

destroy… but they cannot fix. Only action can.” Hannibal’s voice is sympathetic. “And it may be too soon for action, yet.”

He pauses, then asks –

“I can’t help but notice that you seem to harbour more animosity toward Dr. Bloom than you do Agent Crawford. Why is that?”

Will slumps back further onto the bed. It’s unfairly soft for how sharp this conversation is.

“Jack never understood who I am or what I do, and he didn’t try to pretend otherwise. He didn’t care how it worked as long as it did. I was just a tool for him, a means to an end. When he decided to put me away, it didn’t feel like as much of a betrayal. Yeah, he pulled me back into the field. And yeah, I trusted him when he said that he didn’t want me to break more than necessary. But… Alana was my friend. Really my friend. I trusted her with more of myself than I’ve ever let anyone else see. And she couldn’t handle what was there. She didn’t just throw me away like Jack did. She got me to open up to her in a way that I never have anyone else and then she told me I was a monster.”

It hurts to say it all out loud. He’s not even sure why he’s admitting this to Hannibal. It’s just… easy to talk to him. Easy to say things that he normally would only think, because there’s never any threat of judgement in his expression.

“I see.” Hannibal’s footsteps are quite but Will can feel the dip in the bed when he sits down next to him. “I have always been of the mind that Alana’s intentions are larger than her capabilities. She sees things only in black and white. Good and evil. Her morality is a fixed point with no flexibility. It is an unpleasant flaw in a psychiatrist, but worse in a friend.”

“Mm,” Will agrees, humming because he thinks he’ll start crying if he tries to talk.

“You do not have to forgive her,” Hannibal continues. “Not now. Not ever if you do not want to. Despite my existing relationship with her, have no intention of making you see Alana in any other way than you already do. In fact, I currenly only have one hope that I would like you to indulge me on.”

Will turns his head, gazing quizzically at Hannibal. “What’s that?”

“Join me for dinner?"

Chapter 16

Chimera you show no mercy
So savage you're breathing fire
You vicious, enchanting monster
Feel my veins with cool desire

- Animal by Badflower

“Smoked quail drizzled with a pomegranate reduction and nestled on a bed of shaved fennel,” Hannibal announces as he places a plate in front of Will, who does his best to look attentive, appreciative, and like he has any idea what he’s talking about. “It is a dish I would normally serve with Gewürztraminer… however, given your current condition, alcohol is inadvisable. Therefore, we’ll both be enjoying our meals with Svalbarði: water collected from a polar iceberg.”

“I feel like I should go on record, here, and say that we would still be friends if you served me tap water,” Will says, watching with disbelief as Hannibal lifts a crystal pitcher from the center of the table and pours two glasses of unbelievably *pretentious* water. “I’ve even been known to drink straight from hoses during the summer. Iceberg quality might be wasted on me.”

Hannibal sets the pitcher aside. “Nothing is ever wasted if it is enjoyed, Will. However, I am glad that you shared that with me. Until this moment, I had naïvely assumed that we only had your physical recovery to focus on going forward. Now I realize that I will have to fix your palate as well.”

Will snorts and the corner of his mouth twitches with amusement as he tries to imagine Hannibal willingly consuming *anything* that his palate is already accustomed to. Hot pockets, packets of ramen, those buffalo-chicken roll-ups he’d get from the gas station when field work was being particularly demanding, and he knew he wasn’t going to find much more variety on the road.

“I think the phrase ‘lost cause’ would be appropriate here,” Will says, out loud, putting the laundry list of food faults into his pocket for now. There would probably be time to horrify Hannibal in the future. “But you’re welcome to try.”

“Thank you.”

He sounds genuinely grateful for the opportunity, like Will had just offered him a gift by agreeing to eat whatever was put in front of him, and it…stings, somehow. Something in Will’s chest twinges at how Hannibal seems to throw himself at any opportunity to serve without ever asking for anything in return.

He wonders how many people expect exactly that kind of attitude from them. Then he wonders how many of them lock their doors at night.

“The trade off, of course…” Will says, shaking that violent thought from his head and filing it away so that he can be properly disturbed by it later. “…is that you have to let me help you cook. And maybe suffer through a meal or two that I make for you.”

Not hot pockets, his mind says immediately. Not gas station food. He’ll start fishing again, when he’s able. Catch something fresh and put some real effort into it.

“Oh, horror.” Hannibal unfolds a silk napkin with a casual flick of his wrist and Will is surprised when it’s laid out over *his* lap for him but tries not to let it show on his face. “If that is what you consider suffering, then I cannot imagine how I will ever survive.”

“You’re forgetting that the fish I cooked Alana was apparently so terrible that she thought it was people,” the words leave his mouth with a surprising amount of ease. His smile doesn’t even fade. “If that doesn’t put the fear in you, what will?”

“As a lot of effort was recently put into proving that you are not a connoisseur of long pork, so I will forgive you the misconception. But it is entirely possible that Dr. Bloom made that mistake because the dish was excellent.”

Will laughs and then winces as his stomach resents the spasm of muscles that allow that action to happen. “I don’t think you’ll find a lot of takers on that bet, Dr. Lecter.”

“I should expect not to find many connoisseurs either,” Hannibal agrees with a smile. “But your dinner is growing cold, so I will shelve my lament for now. Eat your quail, Will.”

Will obediently picks up his fork and spears a chunk of meat onto it. He pops it into his mouth with all the delicacy he’d offer a chunk of fried gator… and then immediately groans in appreciation, closing his eyes and forcing himself to chew slowly. He’s never had quail before and isn’t sure he could identify it separately from turkey or chicken, but he knows the flavour of a quality smoker.

Will opens his eyes again to find that Hannibal is staring at him intently. Awaiting a verdict.

“Have you ever considered quitting being a psychiatrist to become a chef?” Will asks as he spears another chunk of quail onto his fork. “Because I’m pretty sure that your food is good enough to make Gordon Ramsey rage-quit.”

“There are few things I enjoy so much as cooking,” Hannibal says, looking as pleased as Will has ever seen him. “But I fear I would not make a successful restauranter. I am very particular about the ingredients I use, how they are prepared, and who the dishes are served to.”

“A spot on the guestlist for one of your dinner parties is highly coveted,” Will guesses, knowing the truth as he says it. “A very who’s-who of the upper crust in Baltimore.”

“I am very particular about who I allow in my life. I can be argued that the very essence of food is love itself. When we cook, we urge these raw ingredients to reach their full potential. And when we feed them to others, we ask them to do the same,” Hannibal pauses to take a bite of his own dinner, chewing and swallowing quickly. “I make it a point only to nourish

those whose presence has some value in my life. If they enrich my existence, then I feel it is my duty to enrich them right back."

"That is a nice thought, but it does beg the question…" Will bites his tongue to keep from laughing as the question forms in his mind, but the grin on his face is giving him away. "You walked into the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, saw an accused Cannibal murderer and thought… yeah, that's someone I want at my table?"

"I am a man of excellent taste," Hannibal says archly. "That, in all my life, has never been questioned."

"I'm questioning."

"Of course," Hannibal sets his fork neatly down and leans forward yet speaks so quietly that Will has to lean in to make sure that he can catch what he's saying. "A diamond knows nothing of its own value, Will. It simply exists. Its worth is known only to those who are fortunate enough to see it."

"I am a lot of things, Dr. Lecter," Will says, idly pushing a chunk of quail through a spot of pomegranate drizzle just so that he won't have to meet Hannibal's eyes. "But seen isn't frequently one of them. I told you before not to look if you don't have to. That hasn't changed. I see other people; they don't see me. It works out for the best that way."

"What frightens you more about the notion, Will? That I might see you and be disgusted with what I find? Or that I'll see you and enjoy you even more for it?"

"You won't see me at all, Doctor."

Will's voice is a little harsher now. Rough with emotion and he picks up his glass of pretentious water and drinks it to wet his throat.

"You won't see me," he says, again. "You might see a reflection of yourself if you look and most people can handle that. But you might also see an echo of someone else. And maybe that would be okay, if our eyes met and you happened to see a piece of my father in my expression or a smile that I got from some guy I was on the force with back when I lived in Louisiana. You'll see that and you'll think that's okay, too. But you might the shadow of a killer. You might see the emptiness behind their eyes or the manic frenzy that lives in their blood. You'll see me wearing that and you think that's who I am and that's when things get complicated."

"That's when I decide that you're guilty of the crimes that these echoes of other minds have committed and lock you away?"

"Yeah," Will finally looks up. Finally meets Hannibal's gaze and some fierce, jaded part of him *dares* the doctor to look back. To slip up and show Will that he has doubts about him; that he'll betray him at the first opportunity. "Something like that."

But Hannibal only stares back calmly. The deep maroon of his eyes reflects the lights in the dining room, makes them sparkle, but that's all Will can see. A reflection of their

surroundings and nothing deeper than that. And it's truly unnerving, to see but not be able to wrap his fingers around any one emotion and rip it out of him to take for himself.

"I feel I owe you an apology, Will."

Will blinks. "What?"

"These feelings that you have… this intimate knowledge about the fallibility of other humans and their innate misunderstanding of anything that does not work exactly as they expect it should? It has been exacerbated by Alana's betrayal of you." Hannibal's tone is far, far too casual for the direction this conversation is going. Will feels like someone just dumped the iceberg water over his head. "She was your friend, yes. But she is also a psychiatrist, who should have offered you a greater understanding of your mind than anyone else has before. And if she could not, she should have told you so instead of leading you to believe that you were being seen and understood as you deserved to be. She did not. And, as her mentor, I cannot help but feel that was a failing of my teachings. I failed her in a way that allowed her to fail you."

"No, that's not – she's a grownup," Will argues, a sharp stab of heat slicing through his gut; anger roiling as he puts this moment as another mark on Alana's ledger. Furious with her for causing a moment that she's not even here for. "She had plenty of time to figure out anything that you couldn't spoon feed to her."

"Even so." Hannibal begins to rise from his seat and Will's startled to realized that they both finished their dinner already. "I cannot hope to convince you that I enjoy your company with words alone. Nor can I hope that it is enough to say that I will not turn my back on you no matter what your eyes may reflect at me. But if you will give me the time… I think I can prove it to you."

"I don't have much else going on, Hannibal." Will gestures vaguely to the empty space around him, as if to highlight his lack of job, proper housing, social skills, and friends. "Time seems to be the only thing I've got and if you really want it, then you can have it. Don't expect me to get why you're so set on this, though."

"It is a very rare thing to meet a kindred spirit," Hannibal lifts Will's plate up and balances it neatly on his arm before reaching for the water glass. "Trite as it might be to say, I feel as if I've known you for a very long time. It would be a very unfortunate to lose that."

"That's not the part that I don't get," Will says, standing so that he can grab the other dishes, ignoring the look of reproach that earns him. He's not an invalid, dammit, and he's going to meet Hannibal halfway here. "I… feel surprisingly comfortable with you too. I shouldn't. I should feel weird about all of this. I only met you three weeks ago and now I've practically moved in. It should be more awkward than it is. But it's not. And I can accept that."

"What is that you can't accept, Will?" Hannibal tries to take the silverware from him as he asks.

Will swats at his hand. "Stop that, I'm helping you."

“You should be sitting.” Hannibal’s expression is stern, but Will can see the amusement behind it. “Doctor’s orders.”

“In Dr. Graham’s opinion, the patient is fine to move around.”

“Dr. Graham only holds a doctorate in psychoanalysis. He is not qualified to give an opinion on my patient’s medical needs.”

“Your patient?” Will holds a fork threateningly at Hannibal as he speaks, miming jabbing at him if he tries for the silverware again. “I thought your relationship with the patient was strictly friendly. In the interest of professional boundaries, you have no more say over him than someone who only holds a doctorate in psychoanalysis.”

“You have a point, Dr. Graham,” Hannibal concedes. “He is not my patient.”

“No, he is not.” Will says, feeling victorious as he starts to grab more silverware off the table, adding his weaponized fork to the pile now that Hannibal is going to let him help.

“If he were, I could not do this.”

Will doesn’t see Hannibal drop the dishes he was carrying, but he does hear them clattering to the floor – *shattering* on impact – as Hannibal comes up behind him and picks him up as though he weighs nothing at all. Will yelps in surprise as he’s suddenly being held bridal style in Hannibal’s arms.

“Hannibal!”

“If you insist on carrying the silverware to the kitchen, then I must insist that you be seated as you do so,” Hannibal sounds much, much, *much* too calm for someone who just yanked another grown man up like he was a sheet of paper. “It would be poor form of me, as your friend, to allow you to strain yourself.”

“You just broke your own dishes so that I wouldn’t walk to the kitchen?” Will asks, incredulously. He tries not to squirm too much, reluctant to be dropped onto the ground even if his ego is bruised at the thought of being carried anywhere. “Are you insane?”

“They are easily replaced,” Hannibal doesn’t sound even a little embarrassed by his impulsive behaviour. “There is only one you, however. And if you insist on helping, then I can only accommodate you while you do.”

“Put me down.”

“Will you give me the silverware?”

“No.”

“Then, no.”

“*Hannibal.*”

"*Will.*"

It sends a sharp stab of something through Will, hearing Hannibal mimic his inflection while he says his name and he tries to convince himself that his stomach only drops for fear of falling when Hannibal starts walking, casually, to the kitchen.

"You are out of your mind."

"I am very much in my mind, actually." Hannibal walks around his counter and brings Will to the sink. "Drop them in, if you please."

"What if I don't?"

"Then I will not put you down."

It's not the threat of never being set down that moves Will's hand. It's his fear of the feeling that he gets when he imagines it – when he realizes that part of him genuinely wouldn't mind being held like this for a while longer. Human contact had been scarce in prison and what little was offered was very unwanted. And though Will hadn't brought it up, the last good contact he could remember was when Hannibal held his hand in the hospital.

He feels the same now that he did then. *Safe.* And it's terrifying. So, he drops the silverware in.

"Happy?"

"Frequently."

"…Are you going to put me down?"

"Of course not," Hannibal says, smiling thinly as turns back around and carries Will back into the dining room and then right through it, starting down the hall. "There's glass on the floor. And you need bedrest. I am going to be certain that you get it by putting you there myself."

"Are you going to read me a bedtime story too?"

"If you'd like."

Will rolls his eyes so hard that he thinks he sprains something and bites his tongue until he tastes blood, just so that he won't smile and convince Hannibal to make this a regular thing.

"I'm good. Just wondering what the limits are with you. Do you treat every guest in your house like this or am I just particularly pathetic?"

"You are a guest unlike any other," Hannibal confirms, and Will pretends not to be relieved to know that he's not just one body out of a thousand that Hannibal has hoisted around his house. "No one else would swat at me for trying to clear my own dishes."

“Of course not,” Will agrees, irritably. “They’d just let you do all the work like being invited over is a credit to how worthy they are to be served by you. Like they’re doing *you* a favour just by showing up.”

“They would,” Hannibal agrees, adjusting Will’s weight in his arms so that he can open the door to his room. He steps through the threshold and both Winston and Harley perk up where they’re laying on Will’s bed, tails thumping against the comforter. “As convention dictates. The host takes care of everything. The guests need only enjoy.”

“Then I don’t want to be a guest,” Will says, gruffly, as Hannibal gently sets him down onto the bed. “You gotta let me meet you halfway on stuff. Cooking, cleaning, whatever. I want to help.”

“Within reason,” that’s not a promise and Will knows it. “You are still recovering, Will.”

“I don’t think a walk to the kitchen would have ended my life.”

“We’ll never have to know, now.” Hannibal is infuriatingly dismissive. If Will wasn’t so full of good food and resting on the softest mattress in the world, he’s pretty sure he’d be pissed off about it. “You never did answer my question, Will.”

“Which one was that?”

“What is it about my friendship that you cannot accept?”

Ah.

Will’s suddenly a little less comfortable on the mattress. He clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth and Winston dutifully rises and climbs up the bed to be closer to him, so that he can stroke his anxious fingers through his fur.

“It’s the give without take,” Will says, focusing on his dog. “It shouldn’t be like that, anyway, but it really throws me through a loop because I don’t think there have been many people in my life who offer me anything without asking for stuff in return. People want to use my mind until they can’t anymore. I’m not getting that vibe from you and it’s… unsettling.”

“Would it help you to know that there are things that I want from you?”

Will’s fingers still against Winston’s fur. “Maybe a little.”

“Then know that there are. Nothing I will demand. No expectations that you must follow in order to earn my friendship. But wants, nonetheless. It is the nature of man to be selfish, and I am as human as anybody. However, for the time being, I am content in giving more than I take.”

Will turns his head to look back up at him. Checking for deceit and finding none, as usual. “But if you had to say something that you want to take? Out of curiosity.”

Is it just his imagination or did Hannibal’s gaze travel to his mouth? Will licks his lips impulsively, feeling a flash of something… but it’s gone as quickly as it came and nothing

lingers behind it, not even an echo that he can draw out to put a name to.

“Right now, I want you to rest.”

“That’s not taking, Hannibal. That’s giving.”

“That is my request. You can choose whether you will comply, and I will see you in the morning either way. Unless you need me before then, in which case, do not hesitate to call for me.”

Hannibal steps away from the bed and points to a small white panel that Will hadn’t noticed on the wall before. It has a single button on it.

“If you press this, it will ring my room. And I’ll be at your side immediately,” he says.

Will throws his head back against the pillows and groans. “You’re killing me. Hannibal, ask me for something.”

“Good night, Will.”

“Hannibal.”

He stops at the door and looks back. “Yes, Will?”

There are a thousand different words on the tip of his tongue. So many different things he wants to say – *stay with me, be a little more selfish, do you want to talk about whatever the hell made you like this?* But he’s not brave enough to say any of them.

“…Good night,” He says, feeling very much like a coward.

“Pleasant dreams, Will.”

Hannibal closes the door gently behind himself and Will turns his head to look at Winston, who wags his tail in response.

“Hey, buddy.” Will murmurs, scratching the top of his head. “It’s nice to get to sleep next to you again.”

Winston’s tail thumps harder when Will addresses him, but he offers no other response. And, already, Will misses the easy comradery between him and Hannibal. This room is far, far better than his cell but somehow it feels just as quiet. He reaches for the nightstand to grab the remote and turns on the TV, turning it down almost as low as it can go and flipping through the channels for anything interesting.

Sitcom… sitcom… scary movie… Lifetime Original…

He selects the local news, against his better judgment and braces himself to see his name on the screen.

He doesn't see it. Not his name, not his face. He'd known that he had made headlines when he was arrested in the first place; the whole world had learned his name when they thought his was the face of the Ripper. He'd just assumed it would be equally as huge when the FBI had to recant that story and admit they had the wrong man imprisoned. Hadn't Hannibal mentioned reporters eagerly awaiting the chance to talk to him?

He wonders if this is a controlled dive from the FBI. If they'll let him out without openly admitting they were wrong in the first place. If they're barring the story from the news, then the only place he'll be able to see himself in headlines would be Tattlecrime.

And he's… relieved, somehow. He never anticipated an apology, so he can't be sorry for the loss of it. If the FBI are washing their hands of him, letting him go without acknowledging that he was ever there in the first place, then maybe he can just move on. Move away, even. Louisiana is still home and it's not too far…

Will stares at the TV as it switches from the weather report to recapping the abduction of a college kid from a bus station, looking without really seeing. This could be just another story to him. A tragedy with no motive or bodies, sure, but also with no involvement from him. He could look away without having the answers. Maybe work on boats like his Daddy did. It'd be a simple life and maybe his brain would rot in his skull for it; maybe he'd be selfish and cruel for not walking back into the FBI like nothing happened and getting back to work saving lives…

But he could do it. Walk away. Never wonder if this file ever crossed Jack's desk. It's a hell of a feeling, this new sense of freedom. They took everything from him and now that he has nothing left, there's nothing to lose if he decides to cut and run.

Nothing but Hannibal.

His stomach twists uneasily at the thought of telling him that he's going to cut and run back to Louisiana. Feels like a betrayal, somehow. But without anything to keep him here, what's the point of staying? He'd just be inviting Jack to drag him back into the BAU.

Staring down the picture of some wind chaffed girl, forcing himself to imagine how he'd kill her. Over and over again.

Will shudders and sighs, petting Winston's head again for the comfort of knowing that he's nearby. Then he changes the channel as they put the girl's face back on the screen, with a contact number beneath it and settles on a sitcom, hoping that the noise of canned audience laughter will drown out his thoughts long enough for him to fall into a dreamless sleep about boat motors in a world where no one ever dies.

Chapter 17

I love that you're never satisfied
With face value wisdom and happy lies
You take what they say and go back and cry
You're so close to me that you nearly died

- Again by Flyfleaf

Will wasn't used to waking up in the sunlight.

And he really wasn't used to waking to the feather-light touch of warm knuckle against his face. His sleep-addled mind doesn't even think of recoiling, though. It feels familiar enough that he leans into it, cracking open one eye and peering blurrily at the man standing over him.

"Hannibal?" He asks, confused.

"Good morning, Will." Hannibal says, his voice lightly conversational. "Or should I say afternoon? It's nearly one."

Will's eyes snap open all the way at that and he lurches upright, heart hammering in his chest like it's ready to bust through his skeleton. The blankets fall away from him to pool around his hips and he looks around a little wildly, as if needing evidence that he'd really slept the entire morning away. The rest of the bed is empty, but he can see the indents left from where Winston and Harley had been sleeping next to him. They must be outside; Hannibal would be wise enough to let them out, even if Will was dead to the world, and something like shame burns through him. Day one of life on the outside and he's already making mistakes.

"I'm sorry," Will says, his voice thick with sleep. He rubs at his eyes to clear the grit away and frowns. "I didn't mean to sleep that long. I should have set an alarm or something."

"Nonsense," Hannibal doesn't sound upset by Will's lack of forethought. That's a good sign, at least. "You needed your rest, Will. And I was happy to leave you to it for as long as I could. However…"

The corners of Hannibal's lips turn downward, and his posture grows stiff. Something's bugging him, and Will's chest tightens in response to whatever it is.

"What's wrong?"

"Agent Crawford is here," Hannibal says lightly. His lips wrap around Jack's title and name with all the delicacy one would afford a rabid animal. "He would like to speak to you and

isn't willing to take "no" for an answer."

Images of co-eds dance through Will's mind; all dark haired, all average height, all tinged grey with death; lips blue and eyes eternally frozen open in terror, shining with the reflection of their nameless killer. He can see it; the manila file on Jack's desk. The whiteboard with pictures taped to it, dry-erase notes scribbled. Lines leading to dead ends; phones lighting up with false confessions from deranged minds.

He can practically *smell* the air in the office. Thick with tension. All eyes on him, demanding him to perform the impossible. Pull another miracle out of a hat; save their asses, do their jobs, and look. Look closer, look harder, wrap your hands around the throat of a dead child and feel what the killer did to her. Think like him. Be him. Swallow his identity whole and let it rot deep in the pit of yourself, until he starts to come apart under the weight of it again. Until they strap him back in that jacket and throw him away in another asylum and never let him out again. And this time there will be no Hannibal to the rescue, no lucky *kill* from the real Ripper. He'll just be left alone with the demented minds of every killer he's ever had to pretend to be to save another life and it's too much. It's too much. It's –

"*Will.*"

Hannibal's hand in on his shoulder. He squeezes tightly and brings Will back out of his own head. His lungs are screaming at him and, oh, he's not breathing.

Will exhales sharply, coughing as the pain of holding his breath makes his chest burn. Hannibal's hand moves from his shoulder to his back, rubbing comforting circles against his skin. Will has to bite his tongue until he tastes blood just to stop himself from launching at Hannibal. He wants nothing more than to cling to him, to let Hannibal soothe it all away.

It's a bizarre urge. Hannibal had saved his life a thousand times over by taking his side at the BSHCI, by stopping Matthew from eating him, by letting Will stay with him at his home and getting his dogs back for him… it makes sense to think of him as a safe space, sure. But, apart from hand holding in the hospital and Hannibal carrying him around last night, they weren't that physically familiar with each other.

Hell, Will wasn't that physically familiar with ANYONE. Even before he went to prison. So why does he want it so badly now?

"I can remove him from my house," Hannibal offers, quietly, when Will says nothing. "If you are not ready. He says he won't take no for an answer… but there is something just as succinct as, "get out" if you ask me."

It's tempting. God, is it tempting. Will could just hide in here, pull the blankets over his head and sit in the dark until Hannibal comes back and tells him that it's safe. But the thought disgusts him just as much as it tempts him. He's never hidden from anything before. Isolated himself, sure. But when "it" – whatever it was – found him again, he faced it.

He throws the blankets back. "No. He'll just keep coming around, making your life miserable too. No reason for us both to be nailed to that cross."

“As you wish.” Hannibal says, as if life is really as simple as Will saying what he wants, and it happens just like that. “I had brunch waiting whether or not Jack Crawford would be joining us, so it’s just as well.”

“Coffee?” Will asks, hopefully.

“Of course.”

Now that’s something to get out of bed for. Will swings his legs around and steps out of bed… only to stumble on the first step he takes and nearly fall over. Hannibal’s moves faster than his body can fail him, though, and his hands are there in an instant, catching and steadying him.

“Shall I carry you to the table?”

Will feels his face burn with a blush at the teasing note in Hannibal’s voice, knowing damn well that Hannibal *would* pick him up and carry him out there, in front of Jack, if given the slightest inclination that Will needed him to. Or, hell, even if he didn’t.

“I’m fine.” Will says, hastily. “Just slept too long. Gotta get my bearings. I’ll meet you both out there in a minute.”

Hannibal says nothing, but there’s a note of disbelief in the silence, like he’s not sure if Will can really handle the task of walking to the dining room by himself.

“Out.” Will says, pointing to the door. “I don’t need a doctor, so go be a host. Jack’ll probably get off on the whole not having to do anything but enjoy it thing you’ve got going on, anyway.”

“I don’t particularly care what Agent Crawford gets off on,” Hannibal says, blandly. “You’re the only one of any interest to me in that regard.”

Did he just say that? Will can feel his face growing warm again, even as he internally berates himself. There’s no way that Hannibal meant… he’s just parroting Will, right? Being crass right back at him because that’s how Will set it up. He doesn’t actually mean –

“The perfect host prefers a guest that rebels against him?” Will asks a little too loudly. Overcompensating for the voice in his head that’s interested in the possibility of innuendo. Bad voice. Bad. “Sounds a little masochistic, doc.”

“Not at all,” Hannibal’s voice is still even. Almost bland, in fact. Belying the smile on his face. “If it’s such torment for my guest to be treated well, and I enjoy treating them anyway, that would make me a sadist.”

“Sadists get off on pain,” Will points out, faintly.

“Pain and pleasure are not opposites, Will.” And *fuck* if the timber in his voice doesn’t make Will shiver a little. “When looked at closely, they are very similar, in fact. Often intertwined; blending until they are indistinct from the other.”

Will doesn't have an answer for that. No clever retort sits on the tip of his tongue. What he does have is an uncomfortable tightness in his previously comfortable pajama bottoms and a very strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. Is Hannibal… flirting with him?

No. He can't be. Why the hell would he? He's… Hannibal, and Will is a fucked-up mess fresh out of an asylum. This is all just metaphor. Benign and casual and Will is hearing things that aren't there and seeing things that aren't there because the idea of Hannibal being attracted to him is insane.

"I'll go and attend to Agent Crawford, before he thinks that we've made a daring escape from his company," Hannibal says, before Will can think of anything to say. "Don't be long. He is dreadful company."

Will cracks a grin at that despite the self-loathing panic that's swirling in his stomach. "I'll be there to save you as soon as I can."

(***)

Hannibal had always cherished the concept of God simply for the pleasure of defying him. The bible was as much detestable as it was admirable; holy words were best taken and twisted into a perversion of their original intent or, even better, followed to their letter until the stench of hypocrisy was the only thing more powerful than that of viscera and death. He enjoyed the shock value of it all, the euphoric terror of creation.

To put it simply… it amused him.

That's why it's so meaningful, now, to know that the most beautiful of Cathedrals would ring hollow for their lack of depiction of true divinity. To understand that people all over the world could pray until their throats bled and no answer from any of their gods would be as powerful as Will Graham's gaze and what it holds in its depths.

Defiance is the last thing that Will inspires in Hannibal, but devotion slips easily into the space where it used to be. There had been more than calm in Will's expression while he was sleeping. There was peace, in its purest form, and it had been so beautiful that Hannibal immediately knew that Morpheus must be enamored with him, too, because if Hannibal could weave dreams for Will Graham, he would create fantasies so endearing that Will would never wake again – would sink deep into the cage of his mind, living forever in Hannibal's hold.

That's what he deserves. To be taken and locked away from the rest of the world; from the unworthy masses who reach out at him with greedy hands, capable of *bruising* but never of inflicting the pain that Will's subconscious begs for, nor the pleasure that would follow to soothe the sting. And it puts Hannibal's teeth on edge to think, for a moment, that he would ever have to willingly hand Will back to those masses and let Jack continue to squander his perfect mind.

It had been daring of Hannibal to tease Will like he had. In truth, he hadn't planned on it. Will's abject horror, last night, at being taken care of without being expected to return the favour had been enough to show Hannibal just how he would begin to weave his web around him. The more that Hannibal did for him, without seeming to want anything in return, the more that Will would yearn to give; would seek to even the score. Already, he was trying to seek out Hannibal's needs. Demanding that Hannibal ask for something in return.

The longer that he didn't, the more that Will would grow desperate to be useful. And that was exactly what Hannibal intended.

But then there was the matter of Agent Crawford. He had hoped that Jack would allow them more time; would give Will space to adjust to life on the outside of an asylum or hospital. Hannibal had been wrong and it irritated him, this reminder that he wasn't the only one who wanted Will Graham for his own purposes.

With Matthew Brown in a coma and Fredrick Chilton recovering from a bullet wound that had only just missed his heart, the two major contenders for Will had been cleanly removed from the situation, at least for the time being. Miss Lounds was an issue yet to be addressed, but Hannibal had a few recipes in mind for dealing with her, should she prove to be a nuisance.

Jack was a much more delicate issue, apparently not to be placated by substitutions to his team; not while he thought he could have Will.

Hannibal knew the feeling. But that didn't mean he would tolerate it. Offering Will a taste of flirtation, taunting him with the idea of desire… it had been born of need. He knew that Will needed a gentle hand, right now. Kindness and understanding where others would only give him pity or uncertainty. But a taste of what was to come was a necessary risk.

He just hadn't anticipated how easily Will would *respond.* There had been confusion, certainly. Uncertainty. But arousal, too. Hannibal could see it in his expression just as much as he could smell it in the air.

It was interesting. Very interesting. And regrettably would need to be filed away for further reflection at a later time, since Jack Crawford is still standing in his dining room, pretending to admire some of the artwork hanging on the wall.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack greets, that plastic smile of civility firm on his face. "Any luck with waking Will?"

"He will be joining us in a moment," Hannibal confirms, gesturing to the table. "Please, sit. May I offer you some coffee?"

"That would be lovely, Dr. Lecter. Thank you." Jack's words are as plastic as his expression, his gaze drifting to the hall where Hannibal had just appeared from, likely wondering if Will is stalling for time. Hannibal says nothing, however, and simply pours two cups: one for the agent, and one for Will.

“I have not told Will, yet, about the article from Miss. Lounds,” Hannibal says, conversationally. “I suppose you have seen it?”

Jack’s hands curl into fists as the plastic expression on his face shatters, giving away to genuine anger. “Seen it? I woke up to it. Thirty calls from every superior I answer to, demanding to know how she got the information that she did. We’re launching an investigation into the hospital security. Believe me, we’re going to find out how she got into his room. And I’ll offer Graham a good lawyer to set her up for defamation. Those photos she posted, there’s no possible way he consented to that.”

“Of course not,” Hannibal agrees, as he adds sugar and cream to Will’s coffee and sets it at his seat. “Though Will may be more agreeable to a lawyer that I suggest. I’m not certain how closely tied he wants to be with the FBI, at this stage in his recovery.”

Jack grimaces. “Mistakes were made, Dr. Lecter. I’m not going to deny that. The situation was beyond any of our understanding. But dwelling on the past won’t do any good. Don’t you think it would be better for Will to move forward?”

“Are you asking my opinion as his friend or as a psychiatrist?”

“Would there be a difference?”

“Of course.”

Hannibal isn’t surprised that Jack must ask. Where Will Graham is concerned, there is no separation of profession and personal to him. Jack sees him as a tool from either perspective, a weapon against evil. It’s almost amusing how misguided that view is, how easily Jack threw Will away for perceived evil that he never committed, without ever seeing what he would be truly capable of. Without Will’s ability to assume the perspective of anyone he encounters, Jack would never get anything done.

Hannibal is so looking forward to taking that crutch from him and watching him fall.

“As his friend, I think he deserves distance from the people who hurt him. No matter what their intentions were,” Hannibal says, ignoring the look of indignation on Jack’s face. “As a psychiatrist… yes, I think it would be good for him to make a plan to move forward. But I couldn’t possibly tell him what direction to move in. He would have to decide that for himself.”

“Decide what for myself?”

Will joins the conversation smoothly, sinking his teeth into the tail end of Hannibal’s words as he comes into view. He’s still his pajamas, the delightfully informal creature, but his hair has been styled away from sleep and he seems to have washed his face.

“The direction of your future,” Hannibal answers, smoothly stepping around the table to pull out Will’s chair for him. “How it is that you intend to spend your time as a free man.”

“Will,” Jack says, greeting him with emphasized bonhomie. “It’s good to see you up and about.”

“Jack,” Will’s own greeting is sour as he takes the offered seat. Hannibal tries not to grin as he pushes Will’s chair in a bit, then picks up a folded napkin and smartly snaps it out, settling it over Will’s lap. Establishing his role as Will’s caregiver; a silent promise that he can provide for whatever it is that he needs or wants. “It’s nice to see that you haven’t let embarrassment over falsely imprisoning an innocent person stop you from harassing anybody.”

Jack’s smile doesn’t fade, but his eyes do narrow. “You never were much of a morning person.”

Will makes an angry sound in the back of his throat but otherwise says nothing, just grabs the cup of coffee that Hannibal put out for him and takes a gulp… then sighs with contentment.

“Wow,” He says, lowering the mug. He wipes his mouth with the back of his arm like a hellion. “Is there anything you can’t make better than anyone else, Hannibal?”

“No,” Hannibal says, feeling no need to fake modesty. Why bother with pretenses, when his honesty makes Will grin like that?

“I suppose you’re wondering why I came to visit, Will.” Jack interjects, trying to steer the conversation back to himself. Refusing to let Will deflect and Hannibal takes his own seat, smiling thinly as he settles in for the show.

“Seven missing girls,” Will says, stabbing his fork into his scrambled eggs. “All very Mall of America. All vanished without a trace, no note, no ransom demands, and no bodies recovered.”

“I see you wasted no time catching up on the news,” Jack conceals his surprise poorly, but Hannibal isn’t shocked at all. He’d been able to see what Will had settled on watching through the camera hidden in one of the paintings on the wall. “But we’re up to eight missing girls now.”

“Eight?” Hannibal asks, feigning concern. “Another girl has gone missing?”

“As of this morning, yes.” Jack scoops up a forkful of his own scrambled eggs, shoveling them into his mouth with much less grace than Will possesses. “All abducted on a Friday, so they’re not reported missing until Monday. However he’s covering his tracks he needs the weekend to do it.”

Will sets his fork down, his expression guarded. “Sounds like you have a lot of work ahead of you, Jack.”

“Her name is Elise Nichols. She goes to St. Cloud State on the Mississippi and she Disappeared Friday.” Jack says, rattling off the details meaningfully. “Supposed to house sit for her parents over the weekend. Feed their cat. Never made it home.”

Will stares down at his plate and speaks through gritted teeth, like the words are being pulled out of him rather than offered through his own volition. Hannibal watches with fascination. “One through seven are dead, don’t you think? He’s not keeping them around if he’s got himself a new one.”

“Which means we’re focusing on Elise Nichols,” Jack says, emphasizing her name. For a moment, Hannibal’s not certain why. But then Will flinches and understanding dawns on him. Empathy. Jack is trying to appeal to the inherent goodness in Will; the same driving force that refused to let Hannibal clear the table alone would balk at the idea of leaving a young woman to die if he could save her.

Jack Crawford is a novice at manipulation. Too brusque and obvious, driving forward with a heavy hand. But Will is easily cowed, pliable to the needs of others. If he meets Jack’s gaze, even by accident, he’ll be drawn in.

Hannibal isn’t certain what he wants more. For Jack to fail in his quest to re-recruit Will or for the chance to see what Will is like in the field, unrestricted and overburdened with the sight of death.

“You don’t have a lot of time to find her, Jack,” Will says. He curls his hands into fists against the table, knuckles turning white. “Whatever he does with them, he’ll be done by Friday and hunting again. I can’t imagine that your bosses will be thrilled to learn that you wasted that valuable time having brunch with us. Shouldn’t you be at the office?”

“We should be at the office,” Jack says. He sets his own fork down and leans forward, eyes intense. Searching for a chance to meet Will’s gaze and draw him in. “No one does what you do, Graham. You have a very specific way of thinking. You can make leaps that no one else can.”

“The leaps I make got me thrown into an asylum and cost me everything I ever had,” Will’s voice is quietly furious, but Hannibal can almost hear his resolve wavering. “You’ve got Alana. You’ve got Heimlich at Harvard. They’re just as versed at psychoanalysis.”

“But they’re not you. And you know that.” Jack’s tongue darts out to wet his lips. “You’ve got a reason to be skeptical. A genuine grudge against the FBI. And I meant what I said before – I’ll step down from my position the second that I have the Ripper behind bars. I’ll let them throw me into the BSHCI if that’s what you want. But not a second before. And I’m not going to turn a blind eye to the cases that cross my desk until then. And you shouldn’t either. Graham, whatever you think of me? Don't take it out on Elise Nichols. You could save her life.”

“If I may interject,” Hannibal says, lightly, bringing both of their attentions back to him. Jack shoots him a furious look for interrupting while Will seems surprised to find that it’s not just him and Jack in the room. “The only person responsible for whether or not Elise Nichols lives or dies is the man who took her. Will is still recovering from his surgery; not to mention the months of isolation and the toll that it took on his psyche. I cannot, as his friend, allow you to bully him into agreeing to something that he is simply not physically or mentally ready for.”

“Dr. Lecter,” Jack cajoles him, his tone sticky sweet with the attempt to appeal to his ego. “With all due respect, I’m only asking that he look at the case. Go over the evidence, see what conclusions he comes to. He doesn’t have to come back out into the field; he can do it from the comfort of your home.”

“Will.” Hannibal turns to face him and reaches across the table, smoothing his thumb over the back of his hand, offering comfort and delighting when the tension in Will’s shoulders begins to melt away at the contact alone. “Do you want to look at this case?”

“…No,” Will’s voice is thick with emotion and Hannibal wants to slip his tongue into his mouth and taste the frayed edges of his sanity as it comes out in words. “I don’t.”

“Then it is settled,” Hannibal doesn’t stop stroking his thumb against Will’s hand even as he turns to look at Jack. “Will has no desire to return to work for the FBI. You cannot force him. However, as I told Alana Bloom, yesterday, I would be willing to lend my services and help you on any case that you may need a consult on. I may not possess the same empathetic skills as Will Graham, but I could be of some use.”

“What?” Will jerks his hand away. “No. Hannibal, you can’t -”

“Alana hadn’t told me that you offered to assist,” the fury begins to fade from Jack’s expression, calculation taking its place. “I have to admit, your track record as a psychologist is impressive… and you’ve worked as a surgeon, so it’s not likely that you’ll come across any crime scene that you couldn’t handle. When would you be available?”

“I have taken a temporary leave of absence from my practice; my patients are being looked after by a trusted colleague of mine, while I help Will settle into a routine,” Hannibal ignores the horror in Will’s expression. “I could look at your files as soon as you need me to, from the comfort of my home of course. After Will’s health begins to improve, I will see about adjusting my schedule to allow for field work.”

“That would be excellent, Dr. Lecter.”

“No,” Will says, again. Louder this time. “No. Fuck you.”

Hannibal blinks. “I’m sorry?”

But Will isn’t looking at him. He’s halfway risen from his seat, eyes wide with anger and only focused on Jack. “If you think I’m going to let you ruin his life the way you ruined mine, you really do need a trip to the asylum, because you are insane. You are not going to use him like you did me.”

“Hannibal is a grown man, Will. He can make his own career decisions, as I’m sure he will tell you.”

“Will,” Hannibal adjusts his expression to look appropriately startled. “I’m touched by your concern, but I assure you I know what I am agreeing to.”

“No, you don’t.” Will’s hands shake at his side. “You think I’m the first agent that Jack has fucked over? That he’s stepped on just to get closer to what he wants? That you’ll be safe just because you don’t feel what I feel? Ask Miriam Lass how well that goes.”

“You are out of line,” Jack points violently in Will’s direction. “Don’t you dare use her against me.”

“Use her? I’m not the one who used her. You practically giftwrapped her before you sent her to the Ripper.”

“Will, I am warning you -”

“You got her killed. You got me sent to an asylum. How many more people are you going to feed to the Ripper before you realize that you’re not fucking smart enough to catch him? You’re practically his accomplice now, just sending lambs to the slaughter and hoping one of the bodies will come back with a fingerprint on it.”

“THAT’S ENOUGH,” Jack bellows.

He jumps up from his seat and his plate goes flying, shattering against the ground and sending food in every direction. Breathing heavily, he starts to stalk forward like he’s ready to walk around the table and trade blows with Will, and that’s when Hannibal decides to close the curtain on this particular performance.

He stands in one fluid motion and holds his hand out dispassionately, grasping Jack’s shoulder and holding him in place with the same consideration he would an unruly dog. Less than that, perhaps, as he thinks he was gentler while bathing Winston and Harley.

“Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says, firmly. “I believe that Will has had enough excitement for one afternoon. Perhaps it would be best if you left. You and I can discuss arrangements later.”

Breathing heavily, Jack shrugs Hannibal’s touch off but makes no move to get closer to Will, who is practically making the air spark with the anger that’s rolling off of him, his own and the reflection of Jack’s at war in his gaze.

“…Of course,” Jack says, after a moment of heavy silence. “You’re right. I apologize for letting my anger get the best of me and I hope you’ll forgive my rudeness.”

“You are forgiven,” Hannibal says, placating. “These are trying times for us all. Allow me to show you to the door.”

“Shit,” Jack says, his anger melting into resignation. “We didn’t even bring up the Lounds article.”

“The-” Will starts to question, but Hannibal speaks over him.

“I will speak with him about it. And I will see you out now. Will, please sit back down. I don’t want you stepping on any glass.”

Embarrassment turns Jack's face a darker shade but Will only glares with righteous fury at both of them, every bit the avenging god that Hannibal wants to worship. He says nothing to either of them and makes no move to sit… but doesn't stomp over to the glass in a show of rebellion, either, so Hannibal accepts that as a compromise and turns back to Jack.

"Shall we?"

"Of course." Jack straightens his tie, his face still ruddy with humiliation. "You'll let me reimburse you for the dish I broke?"

"It's not necessary," Hannibal smiles thinly, making sure to leave his phone on the table, in plain view of Will as he begins to escort Jack to the door. "I actually broke a piece in the set just last night. Fate, it would seem, has decided that it has served its purpose and is ready to be replaced."

Chapter 18

It's always a nightmare, it's never a dream
A promise we made to kill the days between
They live in the heartbeat and sleep till the light is gone

- Pins and Needles by The Birthday Massacre

Fury coats the inside of Will's mouth like blood, hot and metallic. His hands ache with unspent energy, desperate to swing outward and inflict violence on anything within reach. He can feel the lingering weight of Jack's fury where it settled like a rock in his gut and it screams at him to start shouting, to break more dishes, to put holes in the wall with his fists and stomp his feet to assert himself as the dominant personality in the room.

It makes him feel *sick*.

Sick because it doesn't belong to him. His own rage is wetter than that. He wants to march up to Jack's retreating form, sink his teeth into his throat, and bite until the taste of real blood covers the taste of rage. Wants to rip chunks of flesh from him and then choke the remaining life out of him. Stop him from destroying anything or anyone else. Will's lower lip trembles and his next breath catches in his throat, hitching on sob. Tears come when violence can't and he crosses his arm over his chest and squeezes his arms tightly against his chest, trying to self soothe.

It doesn't help. His brain is too full. Mental images of Hannibal's mutilated body showing up in the next tableau from the Ripper torment him. Will know that he will be able to sleep with Elise Nichols death weighing on him. But what about Hannibal? He wouldn't be doing this if Will had just agreed to one last case. Now the only stability that Will had found in months was going to be eroded away by the waves of Jack Crawford until he had nothing left.

Another sob rips through him. He looks at the table, at the untouched food and the unfinished coffee, and can't stomach the thought of putting any of it in his mouth. He looks at the chair and feels too furious to sit down; too enraged at the idea of waiting for Hannibal to come back and *scold* him like he's his Daddy or a disappointed principal. The last thing he wants to feel like is some little kid with eyes who see too much and a heart that can't stop fuckin' bleeding for everyone.

The final thing he sees is the phone.

Hannibal's phone, to be exact. Sitting in front of his seat, next to his unfinished plate of food. And Jack's mention of Lounds comes echoing through his head. A new article had been posted, obviously. And it didn't take any empathetic skills to know that it would be about him. The only thing he didn't know was how bad it was; what Lounds had done this time to drag his name through the mud. Only she could make his innocence seem shameful.

He should wait.

He should do some breathing exercises to calm down, sit at the table, and apologize to Hannibal as soon as he can. Or go get a broom and sweep up Jack's mess, since the least he can do.

But what he should do and what he does do are two very different things and he finds himself moving forward as if puppeted by an unseen hand, grabbing Hannibal's phone off the table with numb fingers and then turning to hightail it down the hall and out the back door to the yard, where the dogs are rolling around in the grass.

Will shuts the door quietly behind him, even though what he wants to do is slam it, and marches out into the grass, dropping onto the first spot that feels comfortable enough beneath his bare feet, and whistles for Harley, who comes trotting dutifully over and sits beside him, waiting for a command.

"Stay," Will murmurs, turning on Hannibal's phone screen.

There's no lock. It opens straight up to the home screen and Will clicks on the Chrome icon, typing Tattlecrime into the search bar and hitting enter before he can second guess what he's doing.

The website's homepage is the first suggestion… and, right underneath, are the words that make Will's heart stop.

It's a Cannibal Eat Cannibal World. (Pictures Included)

— Something terrible lurks within the walls of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and it's not just the patients…

Will doesn't get past the sneak preview into the article on the search result page. He doesn't click on the link; he doesn't see how Freddie managed to take a story about him getting gutted by an unhinged man and almost eaten and make it even worse than it already was. And he certainly doesn't look to see what pictures the headline is talking about because he knows that whatever they are, seeing them will only push him over the edge that he's so precariously balanced on. He will fall without knowing what's waiting for him at the bottom of his mental break and that's the only thing that scares him more than Freddie Lounds' shitty little tabloid website.

He darkens the phone screen and clutches Hannibal's phone in his hand, deciding it would be too rude to just set it on the ground. Worse than the fact that he stole it in the first place. So, he holds it even as he lies back against the grass and stares up at a cheerful blue sky that seems to be mocking him.

“Harley,” he chokes out, tears blurring his vision until all he sees is a blue smear. “Do pressure.”

She moves obediently to settle over him, paws on his shoulders and her weight pressing down against his chest, holding him in place with a familiar warmth. She tucks her head down under his chin and just tethers him to the earth. And Will hears Winston whine as he approaches, grimacing as a wet tongue laves out to clear his tears away.

“Winston, lie down.”

He does. Gracelessly, of course, just flopping down and rolling so that he’s pressing against Will’s side… but that helps too.

Maybe they’d like Louisiana, Harley and Winston. Will could get a cheap house with a decent sized yard. He’s never needed much; happy to scrape by if it means being left the hell alone. He wishes that that his Daddy’s house hadn’t had to be sold to cover funeral expenses; it would be the perfect place to run to, now. Far enough away from town that no one would be popping in to bother him. Close enough, though, that it’s not an uphill battle to get groceries. And right on the water, so he’d always be able to fish.

He could find a place like that, but it wouldn’t be the same. He can’t replace the dusty jugs on the front porch that his Daddy would blow into to make music. He can’t replace the windchimes that his mother made by hand before she picked up and left them or get back the quilt that his great-grandmother gave them; the one that was lost in the shuffle of Daddy’s things being sold, given away, or packed away.

And those are all the things he’s longing for now. His eyes burn with fresh tears as he tries to imagine what his father would think of him if he was standing in front of him today. It hurts more to know that, if he were alive, he would have never taken any of it lying down. The moment that he was arrested, Billy Graham would have been on a plane and on his way to Quantico, ready to raise hell in Jack Crawford’s office.

“Dat dere is MY boy and ya ain’t locking him up fer nuttin’.” Billy would roar, twice the seize of Jack and holding thrice the self-righteous fury; anger that only makes his accent even harder to understand. “Ya corn go on an’ try but I promise ya won’ see da nex fuckin’ sunrise if ya do.”

It’s the same speech he’d screamed at the school counselor in fifth grade, who had tried to suggest that Will might benefit from spending a few days at the local hospital, under evaluation. He’d put the fear of God in the well-meaning man who was the first to really notice how Will took parts of other people on into himself and hauled Will home, keeping him there for three days until the principal came ‘round and promised that Will wasn’t going to be abducted from class.

It had embarrassed him when he was younger, how violently protective his Daddy was. Billy Graham never understood why Will was so different from other people; he knew that Will felt things stronger than most and he accepted that, but the science behind it was beyond him. He never tried to really learn the reason for it… he just loved Will anyway and did everything to protect him from the world. It had been suffocating when Will was a teenager.

But now?

Now Will would give just about anything to have someone in his life who would sooner commit a murder than let someone drag Will away.

“Will?”

Hannibal’s voice startles him and Will opens his eyes to find Hannibal standing over him, frowning.

“…Hey,” Will says, since he can’t think of anything else.

He’s not sure if there is a right thing to say in a situation like this. He started a fight with an FBI agent at Brunch, stole Hannibal’s phone, then laid down in the yard in just the pants he slept in. He starts to mentally gear himself for Hannibal to politely, but firmly, as him to leave his home immediately.

“Are you alright?” Hannibal asks, instead of kicking him out.

“No,” Will answers, honestly. “But I’m getting there.”

“I see,” Hannibal says, and it almost sounds like he does. He doesn’t sound angry, at least. “May I sit down next to you?”

“It’s your yard,” Will says. When Hannibal makes no move to sit, he adds – “Yeah.”

And Hannibal, dressed in one of his expensive suits, drops down onto the grass on the side of Will that’s opposite to Winston’s space and gazes calmly down at Will.

“Did you read the article?”

Will’s face burns with shame. “…I saw the headline. Didn’t need to read more than that. Whatever it is, it can’t be good. And I don’t want to see it.”

“Freddie Lounds found a way into your hospital room, it seems.” Hannibal says, delicately taking his phone back from Will. “The article is crass. It would do you no good to read it, you’re right. However, you should know that the photos are highly personal, and you have a strong case for defamation.”

Will tastes bile in the back of his throat. “Did you see them?”

“Yes.”

“…How graphic are they?”

“There are several pictures of your injury, a few of your temporary colonoscopy bag, and a few of your arm on the IV. She respected your right to modesty, however.”

That’s probably code for no dick pics. Will should feel grateful about that. Relieved, at least. But he doesn’t. It’s hard to feel anything but humiliated. Freddie Lounds broke into his

hospital room. She took photos of him while he was unconscious. What did she do, pull up his hospital gown for a quick shot? Or did she push it all the way up and take several? Clinically dehumanizing him like he was just a prop. All so she could get more views on her website.

“If only Matthew had stuck that knife a little deeper,” Will says, darkly. “At least if I was a corpse, I wouldn’t really care who was taking photos of me.”

“I’m happy to phone my lawyer. There are people with a keener taste for blood than Freddie Lounds and he happens to be one of them.”

Will isn’t sure that he sees the point. Freddie must be slapped with more lawsuits than anyone in the state of Virginia. It doesn’t stop her from doing whatever the hell she wants. He can’t help but think that the Ripper would be doing them all a favour if he actually killed her, instead of just ominously threatening to.

“It doesn’t matter,” Will says out loud. “It won’t stop her. I did just destroy her book deal. What’s a little revenge porn between enemies?”

Hannibal’s expression is hard to read, even as he scrutinizes Will. “You’re upset.”

“You’re an adept observer of the human condition.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitches. “I’ve seen you moments after being nearly disemboweled, Will. You were much cheerier then than you are now. I’m just uncertain why.”

“Being humiliated by Freddie Lounds doesn’t come with a morphine drip?” Will suggests, earning himself a thin smile from Hannibal. “I just… it’s supposed to be over now. I spent every day of the last five months waiting for the nightmare to end. For them to realize that I was innocent and let me go. But they’re not. Not really. I’m innocent, but it doesn’t mean anything. Jack isn’t even a little sorry; all he wants is for me to come back like nothing happened and he’s happy to destroy anything I’ve got in the meantime until I give in. Freddie Lounds will still drag my name through the mud. I lost most of my dogs, all of my friendships, my house is a step away from being condemned… the nightmare continues. It’s just the scenery that changes.”

“I didn’t realize that my offering to aid Jack would upset you so much.”

“Harley, off.” Will says, gently nudging her. Pressure isn’t going to be helpful if he’s just going to cycle through everything that stresses him out and he’d rather be sitting up for this conversation, anyway. Which is exactly what he does, when Harley goes to join Winston in lying down. “Hannibal, you don’t know Jack like I do.”

“I never suggested that I did.”

“No, but you sure as hell signed away your soul like it was nothing,” Will mutters harshly. “You don’t get it. I’m not a unique case here. Jack is obsessed with the Ripper. He’s obsessed with catching him; obsessed with ending him. It started before Miriam Lass ever vanished, but she was the first to make it personal to him. And I’m not even sure that she was the first

person he ever used as a steppingstone from point A to point Z, leaving them to take the fall while he moves forward. And I don't want him to do that to you."

"And I would prefer that he not continue to attempt to emotionally manipulate you," Hannibal says, simply. "I don't intend to be a long-term consultant. Simply a buffer, for the time being."

"Maybe I'm not willing to let you risk your life just so Jack Crawford will stop begging me to come work for him!" Will's fingers curl into the grass. "I can't ask that of you. And you shouldn't be volunteering for it. You said that you're my friend, Dr. Lecter."

"And I am."

"Well, then be my friend. Don't…" Will's voice breaks and he hates himself for it. "Don't *leave* me."

He can't look at Hannibal as the words leave his mouth. Can barely stand to keep his eyes open at all, loathing how weak and needy he sounds.

"Hannibal, you blew into my life like a miracle. I don't really believe in those, but you make me want to. And I can't repay you for any of it and it's selfish and stupid to ask for more when you have already given me everything… but God, please don't let Jack take you away from me."

"Oh, Mylimasis…"

The word is unfamiliar to Will's ear, but the touch of Hannibal's hand to his own is not. Hannibal covers the back of Will's hands with the palm of his own and squeezes lightly.

"I'm not going anywhere, Will." Hannibal says, his voice as warm as the touch of his skin. "Jack Crawford could not hope to take you from me."

There's something significant in the way that he says that, but Will's brain is too heavy with sorrow, anger, and confusion to process it.

"Don't give him the chance to try."

"I already agreed to help with this case," Hannibal says. But before Will can start to work himself up over it, he continues. "However, I have no desire to cause you any undue stress. I will lend myself to this case, for Elise Nichols… and then I will politely decline any future work. Should he persist, then I will take things a step further."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I am not above filing a restraining order."

Now there's a thought that never crossed Will's mind. He had always assumed that Jack was untouchable in that regard – above the law as long as he was working for the BAU. But Hannibal sounds so confident that Will is ready to believe that it would be possible.

“That’s…not a bad idea,” Will says, calmer now that Hannibal isn’t entering a servitude agreement with Jack fucking Crawford.

“There, now.” Hannibal looks pleased and lets go of Will’s hand, only to wrap his arm around him and pull him closer into his side. It startles Will… but not enough to keep him from practically melting against him. “One case and then Jack Crawford will be politely uninvited from our lives.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It is.” Hannibal sounds more self-assured in this moment than Will has ever felt in his life and it’s hard not to trust him. “And will be. I can take care of you, Mylimasis. If you let me.”

There’s that word again. It sounds like music from his lips and Will wonders what it means but isn’t willing to puncture the moment by asking.

“Why do you want to?” Will asks, somehow willing to puncture the moment with his low self-esteem, though. “What do you have to gain from taking care of someone like me?”

“A better question Will,” Hannibal pulls him a little closer. “What do I have to lose by deciding to keep you for myself?”

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I've got my head, but my head is unraveling
Can't keep control; can't keep track of where it's traveling
I've got my heart, but my heart is no good
And you're the only one that's understood

- The Perfect Drug by Nine Inch Nails

A little after nine a.m. the following morning, Hannibal returned from the kitchen, where he stepped away to take a call from Jack Crawford, with a frown on his face and something in the depths of his gaze that Will had no word for but still felt familiar enough to him that his stomach twisted and the previously heavenly bite of melt-in-his-mouth blueberry pancake sours on his tongue.

“Hannibal?” he asks, his fork falling against his plate with a clatter. “What’s wrong?”

“Agent Crawford has just informed me that Elise Nichols’ body was found by her father yesterday evening. It seems that her abductor returned her to her bedroom sometime between investigative sweeps.”

There’s an irritated voice in the back of Will’s mind that recognizes that this is the second breakfast in a row that Jack has managed to ruin for him. Will pushes his plate away and sighs, looking ahead without seeing anything in the room. Not the table in front of him, not Hannibal, not the walls that surround them… instead, he sees the cold, pale body of a college student. The only one found… the only one *returned*.

“She made it home.”

“Not in the state that her parents were anticipating,” Hannibal says, missing the obvious.

Will doesn’t hold it against him. “No, I think she arrived in exactly the state that her parents were expecting. Alive and well. Think about it, Hannibal. This killer has a type – but that doesn’t mean he’s doing his research into their lives. He watches them. He looks for an opportunity to take… but he doesn’t learn them. He doesn’t want to. These girls aren’t the point of what he does. None of them are who he wants. They… they’re just standing in for his intended victim. They’re a placeholder. If he starts thinking of them as individuals, it breaks the fantasy. If he had abducted her from campus, then that’s where he would have brought her back. No, he took her from the house.”

Will shakes his head. Tries to erase the image of the dead girl from his mind's eye and come back to reality.

"Did Jack say how the cat was?"

"…The cat?" Hannibal asks, brows furrowing.

"He said that she was supposed to feed the cat. If the cat wasn't acting as though it had starved through the weekend, then that should prove my theory." Will rubs at his face with both hands then presses his fingers against his eyes until he sees fireworks of colour from the pressure. "Never mind, I'll ask him myself. I assume he's going to be visiting?"

"Not quite," Hannibal doesn't look up from his phone as he speaks, fingers moving rapidly and somehow Will just knows that he's sending this new information away to Jack for further investigation. "He intended to, but I suggested that you may not be ready to see him again after yesterday's…scuffle."

Understatement of the year. Will takes a gulp of his now lukewarm coffee to keep from saying so.

"Alana will be coming over instead, to go over the files with me. Two fresh pairs of eyes are better than one and she is more versed in the proceedings of an FBI investigation than I am. She will be able to help guide me through the process."

"I could -" Will starts to say, but Hannibal shakes his head.

"You have already expressed your disinterest in continuing to help the BAU solve their cases. We wouldn't want to encourage Jack's thinking that he can change your mind, would we?"

"I'm not suggesting that you call him and give him a play-by-play of my potential involvement," Will murmurs around the rim of his coffee cup, staring into the murky liquid so he doesn't have to meet Hannibal's gaze. "I don't want to help Jack. But you're not him. And I'm just as versed in procedure as Alana is. And faster too."

"That may be true, but Alana is not as easily influenced as you are." It's said as a statement. Lacking in any judgement or condemnation, but it still stings. "And I worry that once you step back into the role of a profiler, you won't be able to stop. You will convince yourself that what Jack Crawford did to you is inconsequential when compared to the injustice suffered by others and, as your friend, I can't allow that."

"As my friend or as a psychologist?" The word tastes like the copper of old pennies against his tongue and Will makes a face. "That sounded dangerously close to a profile, Dr. Lecter."

"Wanting what's best for you transcends titles," Hannibal refuses to rise to Will's baiting. "Alana and I have worked together before and quite well, if I recall. I'm sure we can figure this out in a satisfactory amount of time."

If Will's appetite hadn't vanished before, it would have been reduced to ash by the mention of Hannibal and Alana's pasts together. Irritation floods him, irrational but strong, and not even

the taste of coffee soothes the tide of *red* he feels like he's being drowned in. He's not sure why the idea of them being *friendly* makes him want to start tearing his own hair out, but he chalks it up the loss of his own friendship with her.

Her presence is a better alternative to Jack's, but he's still not totally cool with her and that… that must be why he feels like she's already oppressing this space when she's not even here.

"Alright," Will says tersely. He stands up and starts gathering dishes from the table, his spine rigid and his movements jerky with barely suppressed anger. "Forget I offered."

"Are you finished with your breakfast already?" Hannibal's softly placating tone grows concerned. Will refuses to look at him. "You hardly ate anything."

"I'm not hungry."

"Will, you're still healing from your ordeal. You need -"

"Alana likes blueberry pancakes," Will says, firmly. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled to have the ones that are left. Give them to her. I'm… I'm tired, now. And since you'll be busy with the case, I think it's safe for me to go back to bed."

Sleeping is the last thing that Will wants to do, but the thought of the safety and *privacy* of his room is a soothing balm on the open wound that he's got on his pride. He'd never thought of himself as a man with a huge ego, but something about the idea of Hannibal not wanting his help with the case… something about him preferring Alana… it just irks him. If this is what being "washed up" feels like, then he doesn't care for it.

"…Here." Hannibal steps forward and gently takes the plate of food from Will's hands. "I'll take this. You go on and lie down. But anticipate an early protein-packed lunch. That you *will* finish."

Embarrassment settles over his anger. Will resents that too.

"…We'll see," he says, because pride dictates that he refuses to be agreeable in a situation like this.

And since he has nothing else clever to say now that Hannibal has him feeling like an unruly teenager rather than a rightfully pissed off man, he turns on his heel and starts to sulk away back in the direction of his bedroom… proverbial tail tucked fully between his legs.

(***)

It's only twenty minutes before a knock at the door brings Will's attention away from the re-run marathon of "Friends" that he's not really watching and he sits incredulously for a moment, wondering just how "early" Hannibal meant for lunch to be, before the door opens and a familiar face peeks in.

“Hey,” Beverly Katz leans against the doorframe, still holding onto the knob as she grins at him. “Are you up for visitors, killer?”

All of Will’s anger dissipates into surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“That’s not a no!” Beverly practically *skips* into the room, kicking the door shut behind her and launching herself onto the bed. She bounces once against the mattress before settling down into the space next to him. “I talked Alana into letting me tag along with her. Figured it might be my only chance. Since you don’t have a phone or any social media to speak of, you’re basically living off the grid. Un-trace-able.”

Of everything that just flew out of Beverly’s mouth, it’s the knowledge that he’s hard to track down that gets him to relax. The tension that he’d been carrying since his snit in the dining room melts away and he even…smiles. Just a little.

“You know, I think that’s the first really comforting thing anyone has said to me since I got out of the hospital.”

“Really? Dr. Lecter must be slacking in the psyche department,” Beverly’s grin only widens, despite Will’s lackluster response. “But he must make up for it in accommodations because… wow. Nice digs, Graham.

Will’s face grows hot. “I told him he could set me up on a couch in a basement and I’d be fine with it.”

“Really? I would have asked for a room with a hot tub. But that’s probably why I’m not being swept up off my feet by gorgeous doctors who live in mansions.”

“I’m not being -” Okay, no. He’s not having this conversation. That way lies madness and confusion. “You didn’t answer my question. What are you doing here? Does forensics make house calls now?”

“I’m off the clock, actually.” Her grin fades. “Actually… I heard about your fight with Jack. Bits and pieces of it, mostly. Alana’s never the gossip that I need her to be. I know enough, though, to figure that you might want someone to hang out with while those two are pouring over case files.”

“…Did Hannibal ask Alana to bring you?”

Beverly blinks, genuinely surprised. “No? I’m pretty sure she had to ask him permission to bring me. Unless she was lying about that to stall for time and think of an excuse not to let me tag along. But it seemed legit. Why?”

“It just…seems like something he’d do,” Will says, wondering if he sounds as insane as he feels like he does. “I offered to look over the case with him and he made a big deal about it. Now here you are.”

“I think we can chalk that up to coincidence. I haven’t seen Dr. Lecter since I helped him track down Winston and Harley,” Beverly turns her head as she speaks, looking around.

“Where are they, anyway?”

“Outside. They love the yard and Hannibal seems to breathe easier when they’re not running loose in the house… you helped him find them?”

That’s news to Will and he wonders why he hadn’t thought to ask Hannibal how he got them back for him. Dr. Lecter just seemed to be able to pull miracles out of thin air; it didn’t seem out of the question for him to magically have the remedy to any issue that Will had, not after everything he’d done for him already.

“Yeah. Figured it was the least I could do. I…” She suddenly looks self-conscious, curling up into herself. Will mimics her posture without thinking. “…I tried to take some of them in, myself, when everything first went down. But I still live in that crap apartment and my landlord refused to budge on the “no pets” policy. Honestly, I’m lucky he lets lesbians live there, but still. I was sorry that I couldn’t and wanted to make it up somehow.”

It hurts to think about. His dogs not just separated from him but ripped away from their home, too. Put in a shelter, taken in by strangers… or just left there to rot like he was when they threw him in the BSHCI. It doesn’t help to know that someone tried to spare them from that fate… but it doesn’t hurt, either. At least they weren’t completely given up on at first.

“Yeah, well…” Will clears his throat when his voice is too thick with emotion to be easily understood. “I guess it’s better this way. Hannibal doesn’t really strike me as a pet person… he might be able to make an exception for two, but seven might be too much. Thanks for trying, though.”

“I wasn’t the only one,” Katz shrugs the gratitude off. “Jimmy and Brian tried too, but they’re in the same living sitch I am. We all thought Alana would…”

She trails off. Probably because Will’s eye starts twitching.

“…um, anyway. I was just glad that Hannibal could reunite you with two of them,” she finishes, awkwardly. “I heard that they were well-received. I wanted to visit you in the hospital, it was family and investigative personnel only. According to Jack, I’m not important enough for either. So, here we are. Weeks later. How you doing? Did that guy eat any of you?”

It’s not a funny question. Or at least, it shouldn’t be. But Katz is one of the few people Will knows who would just come outright and ask. And the ease that it slips off her tongue with… well, it’s kind of nice. He missed these things about her. They weren’t exactly close before he got arrested but he’d gotten used to her presence and found it easy to tolerate. High praise from someone like him, who found almost everything intolerable.

So, Will laughs. Just because it’s familiar and familiar is… so good right now. “I was told that he didn’t, but I never got the chance to check. I was sewn up pretty tightly by the time I was conscious enough to realize that I hadn’t died.”

“Brian’s going to be pissed. He had $30 on there being a bite mark,” Beverly sounds pleased enough to tell him that she was on the opposing side of that bet.

“You guys were betting on whether or not a guy ate part of me?”

There is not one ounce of shame in her expression. “What, like there’s other stuff to do? Not a lot gets done when you’re not around. They throw dead bodies at us, sure, but cases don’t move forward as fast. If you thought catching the Ripper would make Jack less obsessive, you’re wrong. Between going through old case files to try and connect you to crime scenes and visiting you at the BSHCI, there wasn’t a whole lot of movement going on.”

She hesitates and Will can feel the change in the air like an electric charge.

“Listen,” she licks at her lips to wet them and shoves her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “Will, I -”

“Don’t.” Will shakes his head. “It’s good to see you, Beverly. Don’t ruin that by apologizing to me. I can almost deal with people believing that I was a killer. Having to hear them say ‘my bad’ after, though?”

“I never thought you were a killer.” She’s apologizing anyway and Will hates the honesty in her voice. “Well, maybe a little at first. You were acting kind of crazy. But no matter what Jack threw on my table or on my desk, I could never find any proof. There was nothing there. I kept telling him that, he kept telling me to look harder…”

She trails off, turning her ahead away from him so he can’t see the tears in her eyes. He can hear them in her voice… but her sadness isn’t his sadness. She won’t let it be; doesn’t assault him with it like Alana or try to guilt him like Jack. It candy-coats this pill, making it easier to swallow.

“I shouldn’t have waited to file my report against him until you were already out. I should have done it the first time he didn’t listen to me. I was afraid to lose my job, but I shouldn’t have wanted to work for a guy or an organization that would do that. I was a coward and you deserved better than that.”

“…You filed a report against him?” That’s not the point of what she just said, but it’s the easiest part to focus on.

“Tried to, anyway.” Beverly’s tone sours from apologetic to annoyed. “He’s already under some major investigation. People were looking in on him when the rate of solved cases when down after you were arrested. It was pretty obvious who was pulling the weight of the team. And that hot seat he’s in isn’t getting any cooler now that it turns out that he arrested an innocent man who happened to be the best member of his team based solely on rank suspicion. I figured a report would be the kiss of death, but it looks like they’re doing everything they can not to hold him accountable yet. If they fire him now, it’s an admission that the system is broken and you can’t put those worms back in their can. They’ll probably boot him for a minor infraction later, but it won’t be for a while. I gave them my report, but I don’t need your skills to know that they’ll probably misplace it.”

That doesn’t surprise Will. It doesn’t even really hurt to hear. He’d known from the moment that bullet went into his shoulder that there would be no repercussions for this. Jack had been bending the rules from the moment that he asked for Will’s help on the case with victims who

were being buried alive to fertilize fungus. He wouldn't suffer any real consequences for the same reason that Will was allowed to walk around crime scenes with a temporary badge and a gun.

Those who enforce the law don't have to follow it. Trying to hold them to any standard is a fool's errand and Will just isn't optimistic enough to try it. He's almost impressed that Beverly was.

"It doesn't matter," he says, after a long moment of silence. "I never expected there would be a price to pay for what they did to me. I just want to move past it."

"Well, I'm still sor-"

Will covers Katz's mouth with his hand. "No. Moving past it means not talking about it, acknowledging it, for apologizing. If you want to be my friend on the other side of the BAU, you have to respect the rules."

He feels something warm and wet against the palm of his hand as a response and immediately withdraws in disgust. "Ew. Did you just lick me?"

"Yup. And I'll do it again. Don't try me." She narrows her eyes at him but (thankfully) doesn't try to apologize to him again. "Okay. You-Know-What is a topic that is off limits. Like it never happened. Let's switch it up. What's up with Dr. Hottie? Have you seen him in less than a three piece suit and is he as gorgeous as I think he would be?"

Will stares at her. "You know what? I changed my mind. Let's talk about prison. Do you want to know what art therapy was like?"

"Come on!" Beverly shoves her shoulder into his, her forehead creasing with irritation. "Alana won't tell me anything about him either and Jack isn't exactly in my gossip circle. I am dying over here."

"He's…Hannibal," Will side-eyes her, glowering without meeting her gaze. He doesn't want to catch her infectious excitement about this if he can avoid it, not when his own feelings about Hannibal are still so tangled up and confused. "He likes fine art, cooking, and imposing his will over other people."

"I'm hearing rich, makes good food, and kinky," Beverly counts it off on her fingers. "No wonder Alana has a crush."

Will's glower fades. "…huh?"

"Oh, don't pretend you didn't notice. She's not exactly subtle about it. One look in her eyes and *I* almost want to make out with him. I can't imagine what's it'll be like for you when they're working this case together. Hiding in here is definitely a smart move."

Will hears her speaking, but the words don't really reach him, not through the thick fog of terror that settles over him at the thought of what she's describing. Alana and Hannibal… that

feeling from earlier comes back like a punch in the face, strong enough this time that it practically leaves its name carved into his skin.

Jealousy.

He's…jealous. Jealous that Hannibal would rather look over the case with Alana; that he chose her over Will. Jealous that they were alone together, with possible feelings festering between them. Long harbored but probably not acted on while he was her mentor. Hannibal was too professional for that…

But they're just colleagues now. There are no rules against workplace romances. The BAU isn't the most romantic setting, but they're alone together now. Possibly not even looking at the folder. They could be talking about anything. Or doing anything.

Will feels panic building up in his chest. Uncertainty makes his blood feel cold. He doesn't know why he's scared of losing Hannibal to Alana; if it's because he has no place for her in his life now or if it's because he does have or at least wants to have a place for Hannibal, but it's too complicated to think about now.

"Will? Are you okay?" Beverly prods him with her index finger. "You look like you're going to throw up. Do your stitches still hurt?"

"I'm fine." That doesn't sound convincing, even to his own ears. "Probably not going to throw up."

"Should I get Dr. Lecter?" She's already starting to stand, either to go to the door or to get out of the splash zone if he *does* throw up. "Seriously, I've seen corpses with better colour."

On one hand, Will can't really imagine anything more humiliating than Hannibal being here, now, while Will is having what he thinks might be a gay crisis. On the other… he thinks he would feel better if he could see that Hannibal isn't kissing Alana Bloom, like his imagination is insisting that he must be.

"I'm fine," Will says, his need to avoid being taken care of winning out over even the pettiest of jealousy. "Just a twinge. Maybe I just moved wrong."

"I don't know anything about the medical care after being carved like a turkey, but you look like your soul left your body for a minute there," Beverly stays standing where she is, her gaze shifting to the door and back. "It's probably worth being checked out."

Will really wishes she wouldn't say "checked out" in the context of him and Hannibal. "I don't need to be checked out. I-"

What does he need?

The question practically comes with the theme to "Jaws" as it crosses his mind, inviting the danger of any possible answer to that question. It probably makes sense, psychologically, that he's feeling this way. Hannibal has been kind to him… and a constant, familiar face over

these last three weeks. He saved Will from prison, from being eaten, from Jack's mental mindfucking…

And he's been a source of comfort. Companionship, too. If he was a spectator, Will would understand these emotions completely. Maybe even call them natural. But he's *not* just watching this unfold. These are his feelings and he's as confused by them as he is terrified. Terrified of doing the wrong things, of saying the wrong things, of misinterpreting Hannibal's actions or…

This is too much for his head. There's not enough space in his brain. He looks skeptically up at Beverly as he realizes that the answer to what he needs is standing right in front of him.

"You're sorry about my stint in prison, right?" Will asks slowly. "Well, I know how you can make it up to me. I need to talk about something… and you're going to keep it a secret."

(***)

"I don't understand," Alana says, shuffling through the photos of Elise Nichols' body. Her cheeks are flushed pink with frustration and the scent of her perfume (vanilla, brown sugar, and warm notes of honey) darkens with her ire. "Will can look at a scene like this and answer questions that haven't been asked yet. But all I see when I look at this is a terrified girl whose life was ended before it started. I don't see why he did it… or why he brought her back when there's nothing of the rest of them to be found."

"Perhaps there was something special about her," Hannibal says, though he knows it was the opposite. He might not have Will Graham's ability to take on the perspective of anyone… however, he knows the kill. "Something the others did not have."

"Or maybe she's the first one he's killed," Alana says, hopefully. "If the other girls are still alive, just being held somewhere… that means we could still save them. But that'll be hard to prove without more bodies. And that's not something I want to hope for."

"Of course not," Hannibal agrees, subtly checking his watch.

Almost an hour had passed since Will had disappeared to his room and the scent of jealousy had still not fully dissipated from the air. It lingered in his stead, a source of comfort for Hannibal since he could not, yet justify the chance to check on him… or to rile him up some more, leave him hurting and wanting so that Hannibal's next gesture of comfort would be all the more soothing for it.

In a perfect world, Will would be festering in his anger *alone*. But Hannibal owed Ms. Katz a debt of gratitude for assisting him in finding Will's dogs and if she desired to see Will, then he couldn't say no just yet.

“I wonder if Will would…” Alana starts to say, but she turns pink before she can finish her own sentence. “No, I don’t mean that. We shouldn’t bother him with it. Jack’s doing that enough on his own.”

“I am wholly confident in our ability to assess the scene without his gift,” Hannibal says, despite his own yearning to hear what Will thinks of this; to see what his mind sees. To know if Will can truly understand another perspective, even with such limited contact. “Especially while he’s in such a delicate phase of recovery. He was quite despondent after his argument with Agent Crawford.”

“I can imagine. Jack’s a pretty intimidating guy and he doesn’t have a lot of hard limits when it comes to getting what he wants. It makes him good at his job, but not as great when it comes to people.”

A very generous assessment of the man, in Hannibal’s opinion.

“I’m just glad that Will has you,” Alana continues, her voice growing fond. “I know I was skeptical about it at first, but with Jack and everything… well, a good psychologist is not the worst thing to have in his corner. And maybe if I spend enough time around you and around here… I can learn how to be a better friend to him too.”

“You are, of course, always welcome as long as Will doesn’t mind having you around here.”

Alana turns her head to look at him, her dark hair settling in waves against her shoulder. She took extra time to look as though she had put no time into her appearance at all. Hannibal can smell the styling cream.

“What about you?” She asks, coyly. “Do you mind having me around here?”

“I enjoy your company as I always have,” Hannibal says easily.

It’s not a lie. Alana is an intelligent and passionate woman. He finds her black and white view of good and evil and of the world at large to be fascinating. When things don’t fit into her world view, she simply breaks them down until they do. Rearranges the pieces the fit the mold, rather than adjusting her vision.

“It’s nice to spend time with you again, too. Even if the circumstances that brought us back together could be better.”

Guilt turns her gaze away. She regrets what happened to Will, even as she credits it for being her open door into Hannibal’s life.

Interesting.

Hannibal almost thinks to coax a little more out of her, to offer a little give before he withdraws and doubles back down on his interest in Will, cementing his place in his life… but before the thought can become more a fleeting and passive interest, a shriek rings out from deeper in his home and both he and Alana freeze at the sound of it.

“…I think that was Beverly.”

Hannibal is already standing, his thoughts immediately turning to Will and all the ways he could have possibly harmed himself. He's not a very graceful creature, Hannibal watched him trip over the same empty spot on the floor *twice* before. If he pulls open his stitches… if he gets an *infection,* it could still turn to sepsis and Matthew Brown could still very well be his murderer.

It's an intolerable thought that has Hannibal moving faster down the hall with Alana trailing behind him. He doesn't knock on the door, simply opens it…

And finds Will sitting on his bed, staring down Ms. Katz, who is standing beside it with an expression of *glee* writ on her face. With her hand pressed over her mouth and joy flushing her cheeks, she turns to the sound of the open door and her hand falls away from her mouth.

"Oops."

"Beverly, are you okay?" Alana asks, appearing at Hannibal's side in the doorway. "We heard you scream."

"I'm fine," the grin on her face is nearly manic, but Hannibal's attention is purely on Will, who looks as somber as a man attending his own funeral. "I'm great, really. Will and I were just talking and…"

"And she could tell you what about, but then I would have to kill and eat her," Will interjects, narrowing his eyes at Ms. Katz who only grins wider. "Which would be a really big hassle considering that I don't know if Hannibal has the right tools for the job."

"That was a joke," Will adds as an afterthought, his gaze shifting to Alana. "Don't have me arrested again."

"That was not a joke," Ms. Katz says before Alana can do more than make a hurt sound it the back of her throat. "I would be delicious. You wish you could take a bite out of me, Graham."

"As a matter of a fact," Hannibal says as he crosses the room, still needing to *see* that Will was, in fact, not hurt. "I have a secret room in the basement where I keep everything you would need to process Ms. Katz into several meals worth of meat, as well as countless recipes she would be well suited for. Should you have genuine need of it."

"That all depends on whether or not she keeps her mouth shut." Will says, tilting his head back as Hannibal stands over him.

Nothing in his expression betrays what on Earth they could have been talking about before Hannibal entered the room, but Ms. Katz dissolves into another fit of giggles.

"I was worried," Hannibal says, resting his hand against Will's arm. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Will looks away from him but doesn't attempt to sever the physical contact. It's hard to tell if he's still angry about earlier or trying to hide something. Both, perhaps. "We're fine. Katz fell off the bed, but that's just because I'm a stimulating conversationalist. No harm done."

“How’s the profile going?” Ms. Katz asks, apparently having mostly pulled herself together. “Any breakthroughs?”

“None whatsoever,” Hannibal says, deciding that he doesn’t care for secrets shared between Will and someone who isn’t himself. “At least, not yet.”

“Will makes it look easier than it is,” Alana says, bringing herself back into the conversation at the first chance she has not to be on the outside of the joke. “But we’ll keep at it.”

“Did you tell him about the antler velvet we found in the wounds?” The mirth fades from Agent Katz’s face, revealing a professional underneath.

“Yes, but I think we’re all in agreement that a deer didn’t abduct Elise or place her back in…” Alana trails off, looking at Will and then quickly looking away. “Maybe we should finish this conversation elsewhere?”

“Jesus,” Will withdraws from Hannibal’s touch, but only to stand. “I’m not working for Jack Crawford anymore. That doesn’t mean my constitution for this has become delicate. I have a doctorate in psychoanalysis. I taught a class on it and covered many, many murders in that time. I think I can handle hearing about…”

He stops turns his head, looking in Agent Katz’s direction.

“There was velvet in the wounds?”

“Yeah,” Beverly nods, completely composed now. “Like she had been gored.”

“…Get me the file,” Will says.

“I don’t know if you should-”

“I have a PHD, Alana. I’m not a child. Get me the file.”

Alana throws her hands up in a gesture of surrender and retreats under the ire in Will’s voice.

“What are you thinking?” Hannibal asks, because he can’t bear to wait and see what the beautiful inner workings of his mind are conjuring up. Especially not while he has that fire burning in his gaze; a threat to anyone who would suggest incompetence or weakness.

“Antler velvet is rich in nutrients. It actually promotes healing. He may have put it there on purpose.”

Brilliant, beautiful boy. “You think he was attempting to heal her?”

“Could have been,” Will says, noncommittally. “She’s the only body that’s surfaced after being taken. It must mean something. Whatever he did to the others, he couldn’t do it to her.”

Alana returns with the folder in hand and reluctantly holds it out in Will’s direction. “Here. This is everything Jack gave me to work with.”

Wil takes it without comment, returning to his bed and setting the file down in front of him. He opens it up and quickly spreads out the pictures with a practiced hand, studying them silently.

A minute ticks by. Then two. Then five. Then –

“I’ll tell you what this looks like,” Will says, jerking as if someone had prodded him. And when he raises his head, Hannibal catches his gaze and sees someone else staring back at him. Ill-defined, but not Will Graham. It's the echo of Elise Nichols' killer; a shining reflection. “It looks like an apology.”

Chapter End Notes

The song lyrics don't necessarily mean anything, it's just whatever one stuck with me the most while I was writing the update. My Hannigram playlist is beautifully cringe.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The farther I fall I'm beside you
As lost as I get I will find you
The deeper the wound I'm inside you
For ever and ever I'm a part of

- We're In This Together by Nine Inch Nails

“An apology?” Jack asks, his lips curling with disgust as the word leaves his mouth. “That’s the best you could come up with?”

Hannibal watches with amusement as Alana gapes at Agent Crawford, evidentially unaccustomed to his rudeness, her mouth opening and closing like a fish who had jumped too high and landed on the shore. And when she does manage to collect herself, the first thing she does is turn to meet his gaze, hands curling into fists in her lap and eyes full of a silent plea to come to her rescue.

He does not. Only smiles encouragingly, bidding her to continue to explain their (Will’s) profile. Not ready yet to placate Jack; too curious what the man behind the title is capable of when it comes to profiling. If he’s truly as feeble minded as Hannibal is ready to believe he is or if there’s more there to plan around.

“Yes…” The effort that it takes Alana to keep her composure is visible in her expression. Every twitch of her lips and spasm of her throat as she swallows back uncomplimentary responses is on display, as bright as a neon sign, beckoning analysis. “That’s the conclusion that we came to.”

“Then look again.” Jack grabs the first photo from the pile on his desk, a polaroid of Elise Nichols’ body, and holds it out in plain view of the two of them. “Because I don’t see the words ‘I’m sorry’ anywhere near this.”

Ah.

He truly is stupid then. Marvelous.

“You are assuming that our killer has the same capacity for remorse as you do,” Hannibal finally says, his pleasure in seeing firsthand the (lack) of skill his adversary possesses dampened only by the fact that Will is not here to witness it as well. “From a more traditional

perspective, this is nothing but a dead body; a young life ended tragically soon and returned home as if to mock her parents."

Hannibal gestures to the photo in Jack's grasp.

"But our killer does not think as we do. And they deviated from their pattern for her. Needlessly so, in fact. It's safe to assume that, after several successful abductions without any leads or clues, our killer knows what they are doing, and they do it well. There are many less conspicuous ways to be rid of a body. To take such a large risk as returning to the scene of the crime in order to tuck Ms. Nichols back into bed declares intent. This is as close to an apology as you could expect to get from someone like this."

"The killer brought her back because he was sorry…"

The incredulity in Jack's voice doesn't abate as he withdraws the picture from their grasp and looks at it himself, searching for what Hannibal has described to him.

"It's possible that the others he's taken are still alive."

Alana doesn't wait for Jack to find what he's looking for.

"Her death might have been an accident. Or something that the killer didn't want to do. If Elise Nichols fought harder than the others; if she didn't stay quiet, then he might have felt that he had no choice but to kill her. Even if he didn't want to."

Incorrect. Hannibal opens his mouth to say so; to offer what he already knows to be true as a suggestion… the door opens and the scent of grass trimmings, birchwood, ozone, and coffee tells him that Will is no longer waiting in the car as planned.

"Graham." Jack begins to rise from his chair, then seems to realize that he doesn't know how to greet Will, so he slowly settles back down. "Ever heard of knocking?"

"Nope."

Will's voice could be mistaken for cheer if not for the tightness in his expression. He kicks the door shut behind him (the hellion) but stands with his back leaning against it and his head tilted back as he gazes past the three of them with a guarded expression.

Hannibal allows himself a moment to imagine sinking his teeth into the delicate curve of Will's throat. Of the pop of skin beneath his teeth, the taste of blood, and the sinful knowledge of the bruise that would follow, *marking* him for all to see and know who he belongs to. Then he files those thoughts away for later recollection, rising from his own chair.

"Will," Hannibal greets him, looking him over to be sure that he isn't bearing any physical signs of harm. "I thought you were going to wait in the car."

"I was going to do a lot of things," Will says, his voice low and irritable. "When I was a kid, a was going to be an astronaut, a firefighter, or a lion tamer. When I was a teenager, I was going to a professional fisherman. Yesterday, I was going to move back home to Louisiana. Today, I was going to let the two of you come in here and give him the profile I created so

that I could stay comfortably distant from it all and look forward to a future where I'm a mechanic working on the docks like my daddy, grandfather, and great-grandfather did."

Will stops to take a breath… then looks away from the wall that he had set his gaze on and finds Hannibal's face, instead, a sour little smile curling his lips.

"I never do what I say I will. Especially if it's good for me. You should get out now while you can. I only get worse from here."

Hannibal doesn't have the chance to scoff at the idea of ever leaving Will's side before he carries on, turning his gaze back to the wall and speaking to Jack now.

"This case is already inside my head," he bites out, the words as sharp as his teeth. "I looked when I shouldn't have, and we both know I can't run from what I've seen. Not once it has its hooks in me. I'll just keep thinking about it. You need your killer; I need a resolution if I'm ever going to get some sleep again."

Euphoria spreads across Jack Crawford's face. He looks at Will as a new believer does the face of God.

"You're coming back to work."

"Will, no." Alana interjects, mouth agape in abject horror as she stares at him. "You can't jeopardize yourself like this."

"I'm tying up loose ends," Will says, firmly. "I want to close this fucking book, Jack. For good. I'll profile your killer; I'll give you all the answers you need to find them. I'll look until my eyes bleed this one last time."

He pushes off away from the door, then, and crosses the room until he's standing at the desk. He presses both his hands down flat against it and leans forward. Hannibal can't see the intensity of Will's gaze or the expression on his face when he finally meets Jack's eyes, but he can feel the power of it in the way that Jack's posture changes.

In this moment, Will Graham is truly himself; a mongoose facing down a snake, poised and ready to kill.

And Hannibal loves him.

"I'll solve this case," Will says, his voice still his own. Not one note of it belongs to Jack Crawford. "But I won't work with you or Dr. Bloom on it. Anything you have to say to me can be told to me by Agent Katz. You don't show up at his house while I'm there. In fact, the entire state of Maryland is off-limits while I'm still there. If I need to go to a crime scene, you will not be there. And once I'm done with this case, I'm done for good. You come near me again, and I'm getting a restraining order."

Jack's face is a dark shade of purple by the time that Will is done talking. Splotchy with rage. "Do you think that you can just walk into my office and talk to me like-"

“Yeah, I do.” Will interrupts him, voice low but level. “And you’re going to let me. Because your other option is telling me to fuck off this case and taking a chance on solving it yourself.”

Agent Crawford has nothing to say to this. His face goes a shade darker, and his mouth stays agape, but no words follow.

“Yeah.” Hannibal can’t see the smile on Will’s face, but he can hear it in his voice and his heart swells with pride. “That’s what I thought. I already gave Beverly all my notes on the current profile. You can pick them up from her. You need anything else, she knows where to find me… but I’m off the clock until tomorrow, so try not to throw anyone innocent in jail until then.”

Will turns on his heel, then, walking smartly back out the door… only to peek back in a beat later, gazing expectantly at Hannibal.

“You coming?”

“Of course, Mylimasis.” Hannibal can hardly breathe past the fondness that makes his chest tighten. He turns his head to look at Agent Crawford and Alana, who have twin expressions of disbelief etched into their faces. Hannibal nods politely. “Agent Crawford. Dr. Bloom. Until we next meet.”

(***)

Will only makes it about fifteen feet past Jack’s office before the panic attack that had been building up in his chest is no longer possible to ignore. The adrenaline and ire that had pushed him from Hannibal’s car and carried him through that insane *tirade* that had somehow made it out of his mouth crumbles away into pure terror and he stumbles over his own two feet.

He’s only halfway into his thought of hoping that the ground isn’t as hard as it looks when Hannibal catches him, not just steadying him back on his own two feet but slipping his hand down his spine to rest against the small of his back and guide him through the halls, seemingly aware of the sharp left turn his demeanor just took. Thankfully, no one stops them and they’re out in the parking lot almost before Will’s next stuttering inhale.

Hannibal silently helps him into the car and begins to reach for the seatbelt to try to strap Will in. It’s then that Will swats at his hand.

“Well,” Hannibal says, withdrawing for a moment. His face is a little blurry when looked at through Will’s watery eyes, but he can still see that Hannibal has an eyebrow raised. “I’m glad you feel enough like yourself to be obstinate.”

Will almost laughs, but the sound doesn't quite make it past the lump in his throat, so he just shrugs. "The day I don't try to stop you from doing everything for me is the day that I am dead inside."

"Then I look forward to your many, many future attempts to inhibit me."

It's unfair how sincere he sounds, especially since all sanity dictates that Hannibal never talk to him again after that display in Jack's office. Will wishes he could blame it on mania, but he'd never been more present in himself in all his life than he had been the moment he stormed into Jack's office.

"Will, you're not breathing," Hannibal's voice brings him back into himself and, sure enough, his lungs are killing him. "Exhale."

Will does. Then he inhales, just to prove that he's not actually suffocating under the weight of his panic, his body only thinks that he is.

"I'm okay," he says, when he realizes that Hannibal has made no attempt to step away from the passenger side of the car.

"That has yet to be determined."

"You're not my doctor."

Hannibal smiles at that. "No, but I am curious what brought all that on. You can't possibly be cruel enough to leave me in suspense."

"I might be," Will threatens, more for the fact that he doesn't want to try to explain himself and reveal just how far gone his sanity is than the fact than any cruelty that might be in him. "How much do you really know about me?"

"I know that Dr. Bloom and Agent Crawford both see you as a fragile little teacup; the finest china used only for special guests."

Will hates on how the money that is. Knows damn well that his righteous fury would be reduced to a snit in their eyes; that any cuts his words gave Jack would be chalked up to the jagged edges of that broken teacup. Shattered on the floor of the BSHCI and still struggling to come back together again.

"That's how they know me," Will says, weakly. "I asked about you. How do you see me?"

Hannibal presses the palm of his hand against Will's cheek and he finds himself leaning into his touch. Enjoying the warmth of it; the strange security that he finds in Dr. Lecter's presence.

"You are the mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by," Hannibal says, brushing his thumb gently against Will's skin. "I only wonder what brought you out. You seemed content when I left."

"…You're going to think I'm crazy."

“I will not.”

Will wonders if there’s ever been a moment in Hannibal’s life where he wasn’t so self-assured; when the truth of every situation wasn’t shaped by the words he said. Probably not. He seems like someone who has never known insecurity in his life.

“I fell asleep.” Will says, before he can change his mind about it. “Just for a minute. I was thinking about the case and then… I guess I was out, because I…”

“You…?” Hannibal prompts, when Will trails off.

He can’t look at him when he says this, so Will turns his head and shrugs off Hannibal’s touch for the moment. “I dreamt about Elise Nichols. I thought I was still awake, for a minute, because I was still in the car. I glanced at the rearview mirror and saw her looking back at me. And when I looked in the backseat, there she was. Just…sitting there. Watching me.”

“And that upset you?”

“Yes,” the words are getting harder to get out, heavy with the weight of his shame. “But not because she was dead or that she was dead in the car. I was upset because she hadn’t died the right way. The way that I wanted her to.”

This is the moment, Will thinks. The moment that Hannibal withdraws away from him in disgust and horror, when the reality of Will’s mind proves to be too much for him to stomach.

“How did you want her to die, Will?”

“…I don’t know.” It’s the truth but it burns like a lie because Will knows that the answer isn’t far out of reach. “It was supposed to be different. I was looking at her through the eyes of her killer, as much as I know of him, and all I could feel was that it wasn’t my design. It wasn’t what I had wanted for her. She deserved more and I couldn’t give it to her. I…failed and it hurt.”

“Did you wake with the feeling of failure still inside of you?” Hannibal asks, his voice soft. “Is that why you want to do this profile, so you can do right by her?”

“No.” This is the really shameful part. “I watched the shadows impale her like antlers and it was wrong. So, I looked away. And then I was myself, again. Not him. Not her killer. I looked back and…I saw you.”

Will’s chest tightens in an echo of the despair that he had felt in that moment. The horror that made his heart drop into his stomach and the panic that had made him scramble.

“You were sitting where she was, impaled on those antlers. And it was just as wrong. I woke up thinking that you were really marching to your death, working with Jack. And I don’t know what my design is, Hannibal. I don’t know where my life is going right now. But I know that I’ll kill Jack before I let him turn you into another corpse I see whenever I close my eyes.”

Will does not want to be saying these things out loud. He doesn't want to risk the friendship that he has with Hannibal by scaring him away with glimpses of how dark his mind really gets or with he knowledge of just how strongly attached to him he already is… but something about Hannibal just draws the words out of him like water from a fountain. He can't stop it from pouring out.

"So, I'm doing the profile. I'm going to stop this guy before the next death that he does wrong," Will finishes, voice hardly louder than a whisper. "Because I can't stand to see him fail twice. Especially if the next time he deviates from his design is when he's got his hands on you."

Hannibal doesn't say anything. Will doesn't hear a hitch of breath in his throat, a sound of disgust, or – or anything. He's so quiet that, for a terrifying minute, Will thinks that Hannibal just left him there. That he turned tail and ran to get Jack to arrest him *again*, because there's clearly something wrong with him.

And then there's a click.

And a tightness across Will's lap.

Hannibal…buckled him into his seat.

Will turns his head, exasperated and ready to snap at him for it… but he only has a few milliseconds to see the expression on Hannibal's face before his lips are pressed to Will's.

It's a chaste kiss and lasts less than thirty seconds, but it leaves Will's head spinning.

"Aš priversiu šį pasaulį kraujuoti dėl tavęs," Hannibal murmurs as he pulls back.

Will doesn't understand those words, but Hannibal's tone is as rich as dark chocolate, and it sounds like a promise.

"…That was impulsive," Hannibal murmurs in the next beat, some of that strange passion leaving his expression. Retreating behind the cool indifference that he carries himself with and Will misses it like a physical part of himself. "I apologize. Your concern for my well-being is deeply moving, but I should not have behaved so."

Will licks his lips. It's a bitter disappointment when he can't taste Hannibal on them. "Please don't apologize. I…"

Liked it? Is that the appropriate response? He's pretty sure that he did, it just happened so fast that he didn't have time to feel much more than shock. But now Hannibal is withdrawing with that professionalism in place and Will feels like he's grasping at the edge of something that's crumbling away, unable to quite hoist himself onto the solidity of its surface all while knowing that he's going to lose *something* important if he lets go now, even if he's not sure what that *something* really is.

Panic drives him and he grasps Hannibal by his tie and pulls him back in close before he can get all the way away and kisses him again. It's much less graceful and loses some of the

chasteness for it, but Hannibal doesn't draw back in disgust, so he figures it's a win.

And when he pulls back, he offers his most charming lopsided smile, the one that he inherited from his dad. "…There. I think that makes us even. You kissed me, I kissed you. Even Steven."

Hannibal's answering smile is probably the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

"…It would seem so," Hannibal agrees, his voice husky. Solid ground, again. No more eroding edges. "As much as I would like to tip the scales so that you have to right them again, however… I did promise you a grocery trip, did I not?"

"You did."

"Then grocery shopping we shall go."

Will reluctantly releases his grip on Hannibal's tie. Lets it slip from his fingers and bites his tongue against the fluttering feeling in his stomach that threatens to bubble up into either laughter or hysteria.

He really does have no idea what he's doing… but for once, it doesn't seem like such a bad thing.

Chapter End Notes

I'm giving up on pretending that I have an update schedule. At this point, I'm just coming to the pond and throwing updates out to feed the ducks. It's all random but driven by kindness. (And it's never bread. Only frozen peas, oats, or chopped lettuce.)

By the way, Hannibal said: "I will make this world bleed for you" because he's very normal about Will.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I could be cold
I could be ruthless
You know I could be just like you
I could be weak
I could be senseless
You know I could be just like you

- Just Like You by Three Days Grace

“This place has a doorman,” Will murmurs under his breath, his free hand (the one not being held in Hannibal’s) nervously patting against the side of his leg as they step through the doors of “Frearo”, a *gourmet* grocery store that he’d never even heard of until the moment that Hannibal pulled into the shockingly clean parking lot. “What kind of grocery store has a doorman?”

“This one.” Hannibal says, pleasantly. As if this was the most natural and normal thing in the world.

“You can get a twelve pack of ramen from Wal-Mart for four dollars and the doors open automatically, so there’s no need for some poor schmuck to throw his arm out opening and closing them for rich snobs. Why didn’t we just go there?”

The way that Hannibal wrinkles his nose is answer enough. They didn’t go there because it’s not in the realm of possibility as far as he’s concerned. It’s not a place for people like Hannibal, who decorate dinner plates with inedible items like animal bone or who make chicken soup with the most pretentious ingredients known to man.

Will doesn’t need to hear him say it. Doesn’t want to, because it’s an uncomfortable reminder of just how out-of-touch they are with each other’s social standings. Just tells him that they never would have naturally interacted with each other if they hadn’t met through the circumstances that they had. It’s too depressing to linger on.

“Is there a dress code?” Will asks, instead, switching to dry self-deprecation for fear of genuine insecurity. “Should you have left me in the car?”

“Will,” Hannibal brushes his thumb against the back of his hand soothingly. “It’s just a store. They have products and ingredients here that cannot be found anywhere else, and their aesthetic caters to affluence, yes, but it is still only a store.”

That's easy for him to say. Will's about 99.9% sure that the paychecks he got from working with the FBI wouldn't be enough to cover items from this place. But he just pokes the tip of his tongue between his teeth and bites down to keep from saying anything else as Hannibal lets go of him to grab one of the *immaculate* grocery carts.

The wheels don't even squeak or rattle when they move against the floor. The bolts that hold it altogether don't groan. Will can still hear the soft classical music that's playing over the speakers as they venture further into the store.

This is hell.

"What produce and ingredients that can't be found anywhere else are you on the hunt for today?" Will asks, so that he doesn't grow too despondent over the lack of familiar sounds in the store.

"Real saffron, Yubari King Melons, Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale, and Kopi Luwak." Hannibal recites from memory. "The latter being sourced from ethical farming practices, of course."

"Mm," Will hums, because not one of those items landed anywhere near understanding in his head.

Well, okay, he knows the word "melon", but knowing Hannibal this wasn't going to be the type that gets cut up into cubes and served in plastic cups during the summer. He drums his fingers a little faster against his thigh, wishing that he'd been explicit about wanting to get out of the house and go somewhere *familiar.* His first outing in what feels like forever should feel more like freedom and less…oppressive, like the air is heavy with the weight of an unseen judgement. The universe knows that places like these are not for him.

The other shoppers do too. It's as quiet as a library in here, with other people gliding past them, dressed to the nines and pushing their stupidly quiet carts and offering polite nods to Hannibal… and confused glances at Will. He must look like a stray that's wandered in by mistake in his flannel shirt and blue jeans.

"They're not judging you."

Shit. Did Will say that out loud? "Huh?"

"Your stimming has increased in intensity every time you are looked at," and there's that casual tone that Hannibal uses when he thinks that Will is being irrational about something. "You certainly don't need a degree in psychology to realize why, but it does help that I have one. And I promise you, they're not being judgmental."

Will's equal parts embarrassed and touched that Hannibal had noticed his stimming and forces himself to still his hand. "You a mind reader now, Dr. Lecter?"

"I know human behaviour… and they're curious about mine. Frearo's prices are exorbitant, and they don't boast a large clientele. We've become aware of each other here, or in other places like this."

Is Will imagining things or does Hannibal almost sound embarrassed?

“I typically do not shop with company. They want to know who you are, but it would be poor form to stop for conversation to learn your identity, as no one so far is close enough to my social standing to justify it.”

Will snorts at the unabashed vanity of that comment. Hannibal really does seem to be a man without shame. “Oh, great. They’re judging you because of me. Well, that’s changes everything. I feel so much better about this.”

“They also do not have the social standing to pass any judgement onto me.”

“Makes me really wonder how low on the scale I rank, if that’s your thoughts about them.”

Will does not mean to sound as insecure as he does, but Hannibal doesn’t let him feel that way for long.

“You belong wherever I am,” he says immediately and in a tone that brooks no argument. “And they should be so lucky to be in your presence. I know I am.”

Heat erupts in Will’s face, like flames from a roaring fire have come to lick at his cheeks. He knows he’s blushing; he can feel the blood pooling. It’s such a ridiculous thing to say and from anyone else’s mouth but Hannibal’s, it would sound corny and affected. But that goddamn sincerity of Hannibal’s is hard to doubt, even with Will putting in all the effort he can muster into disbelief.

Acceptance is still not an option though. One er, two kisses in the car, spurred on by an emotionally charged moment, do not equate an actual relationship or – or the idea that they’re on equal footing. If Will starts to believe in things like that, then he’s only opening himself up for the harsh hit of reality when Hannibal comes to his senses and starts to pull away.

“You’re only saying that because I’m relatively well-behaved now,” Will says, going for a joke when all else seems to fail him. “I was the worst about shopping when I was a kid. Daddy made me sit in the basket until I was fifteen whenever we went because when I was little, I’d always end up running off and he wouldn’t find me until I was having a meltdown in some aisle because it was too loud, too crowded, or someone made eye contact with me.”

“A reasonable solution.” There’s a slight smile on Hannibal’s face and his eyes are a little distant, as if he’s trying to imagine a younger version of Will, being held hostage in cart. “Your aversion to eye contact is the overabundance of mirror neurons or the autism?”

Will isn’t surprised that Hannibal knows he’s autistic. He can’t remember having ever told him… but he’s gotten a little lax on masking. It’s not as necessary when isolated and not so much like riding a bike that he could just hop back on once he stopped doing it.

“Could be both. But I’ve never been without the empathy to know for sure.” Will stops walking when Hannibal does, watching as the good doctor scrutinizes a display of fruit that’s so perfectly without flaws that they might as well be made of wax. “It didn’t matter. I was a tough kid to raise either way. You’re just lucky I don’t start screaming every time a middle-

aged man with a budding mid-life crisis happens to glance at me and tricks my brain into thinking that I'm the one in the middle of a grueling custody battle with my ex-wife who's moved in with my contractor."

"If you did, I would simply put you in the basket." Hannibal selects and bags several apples, then a few melons. The reason behind his selection isn't evident to Will, they all look exactly the same to him.

"He did his best," Will murmurs, defensive of his father's tactics in handling him. "He never really understood what was wrong with me but he accepted it and didn't try to fix me."

Some unrecognizable emotion flickers across Hannibal's face, to quickly for Will to categorize it. But whatever it was, it softens his voice.

"Of that, I have no doubt. Nor did I intend to imply otherwise," he says, his gaze lingering on Will for a moment before he begins to push forward again. The groceries won't shop for themselves, after all. Will follows after him. "I am only…delighted to learn about you. Your childhood, who you were before I met you."

"Wish I had more interesting stuff to tell you."

And he means it. Most people took one look at Will and assume that he had a bad childhood, but really it was just…average. They moved around a lot for a while, sure, and his mama took off when he was still young… but he had a daddy who loved him, he did well in school, and they always lived somewhere open so that Will could run around free without worrying about coming across anyone else.

Whatever it was that made him like this, it wasn't nurtured into him. It was just in his DNA.

"What about you?" Will asks, before he can make himself too angsty with that thought. "What were you like as a kid?"

He regrets the question as soon as it leaves his mouth because the light in Hannibal's eyes goes out. His lashes flutter like curtains being drawn closed and there's an unmistakable emotional distance that hadn't been there before. But before Will can figure out a way to take the words back out of the air, Hannibal answers in a smooth, well-practiced speech.

"I was orphaned at the age of eleven and spent the next three years in an orphanage until my uncle and his wife discovered that I was still alive and took me in. I don't spend much time thinking of my childhood and, unfortunately, there is no one left to remind me how I behaved."

"Probably very well," are the words that come out Will's mouth. His gut tells him that the last thing Hannibal wants is sympathy or to spend much more time dwelling on the details. "Perfectly adjusted. Absolutely angelic. They elevated you to the status of a saint."

Hannibal's careful indifference melts away into amusement and there's a soft appreciation in his smile that makes Will's heart swell.

“That must be correct,” Hannibal agrees. “You and I are just alike, of course. Problem free. Nothing to feel horrible about. Saints in our own time.”

“Laying it on a little thick there, Saint Lecter,” Will rolls his eyes but can’t suppress his own smile, thrilled that he had navigated Hannibal’s emotions so well. “Come on, let’s finish buying your pretentious foods. I want to see if they have rich people version of corn dogs or mint chip ice cream.”

Hannibal stares at him. “…Corn dogs?”

“Fair food,” Will explains, gesturing with his hands. “About this big. It’s a hotdog on a stick, dipped in batter and deep fried. One of the better creations in this world. I like cheap food that threatens the longevity of my existence.”

Hannibal continues to stare at him. The silence stretches on for so long that Will is almost positive that he *broke* him when Hannibal suddenly lets go of the cart altogether and scoops Will up into his arms with ease.

“What the fuck – Hannibal!”

“You are going in the basket.”

With a surprisingly amount of agility, Hannibal removes the groceries that had already been put inside and sets Will down into it, settling the fruit back down into his lap before he’s even totally aware of what just happened.

“*Hannibal*,” Will hisses, looking around wildly to see if anyone had just seen what happened. “Get me back out of here.”

“No.” Hannibal looks far, far too pleased with himself. “This is for your own good, Mylimasis. I have to protect you from yourself, and your dreadful notion of what food is.”

“There are other people in the store, and they are going to see this and really start judging.”

“Let them,” Hannibal starts to push the cart again and Will had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling like a lunatic because this is actually…more fun than he remembers it being when he was a kid. “Their obvious and understandable jealousy is no concern of mine.”

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“Which do you prefer?” Hannibal asks, some thirty-five minutes later as they’ve finally worked their way to the cheese section. He gestures to two seemingly identical blocks and Will blinks slowly.

“Uh…” Isn’t all cheese mostly the same? What do they put in the spray cans? He’s pretty sure he likes that stuff. “Whichever goes better with Scotch?”

“You are not well enough to begin drinking yet,” Hannibal counters, immediately, as he selects whichever cheese, he had his mind set on. He does that a lot; asks Will’s opinion and then settles for his own. It should bother him, but it’s often that he has no idea what the hell Hannibal is talking about anyway. “But it was a nice effort on your part.”

“Hmph,” Will crosses his arms over his chest, trying not to disturb the many, many, *many* things that Hannibal had piled on top of him, essentially weighing him down so that he can’t make a desperate bid for freedom on his own. “I was kind of hoping I was.”

“I will let you know when you are. I would not dare deny you your pleasures.”

The shiver that works its way up Will’s spine has nothing to do with the cool air of this section and everything to do with the word “pleasures” as said in Hannibal’s voice. He’s got to get a grip. It was two kisses in a car, get ahold of yourself Graham…

“Well, good. Then I can let you live.”

“How very fortunate for me.” Hannibal smiles knowingly, as if he’d seen Will shiver (he’s almost sure that he didn’t) and places his selections on Will’s legs. “There is one more at the end of the aisle that I would like to grab and then we can leave. Just stay put for a moment, dear. No wandering off.”

If Will was ever going to shoot lasers out of his eyes with the force of a glare, now would be the time. “Oh, Dr. Lecter’s got jokes now.”

Hannibal’s answering smile is as a sweet as can be before he turns to casually stroll to get his mystery cheese, leaving Will awkwardly stuck beneath a mass of groceries. If this is how the doctor is toying with him then… then he’s not sure what he’s going to do about it, but he’ll do something.

“Uh, excuse me?” a voice behind Will draws his attention and he tries to turn his head to get a look at whoever is talking, but he can’t quite shift enough without hurting the expensive ingredients. “Was that Dr. Lecter you were speaking with a moment ago?”

Well, this is exactly the awkward situation that Will had been afraid of. “Er, yeah. It was.”

“You’re in his shopping cart.”

This guy must be a detective, is Will’s uncharitable thought. He gets tense in situations like this, where he knows that he’s being considered the ‘weird’ one, and it doesn’t help that did not put himself in this situation to begin with.

“He’s just very protective of his purchases. I’m the fruit bodyguard,” the jokes falls flat but the person that he still can’t really see chuckles nervously.

“Oh, of course!” the man says earnestly, finally taking those few necessary steps forward to be seen properly. He’s a short man with a well-trimmed beard and a tailored suit on… it’s almost the exact same colour as Hannibal’s. Same style, too. “That makes sense. Dr. Lecter is a very refined man. He wouldn’t want to take risks with anything.”

Will regrets making the joke with how sincerely this stranger believed it and feels himself floundering under the uncertainty of this social situation. Conversation with Hannibal happens so naturally that Will can make himself forget that talking to other people is akin to pulling teeth with a rusty set of pliers.

Luckily, the stranger doesn’t make Will try to make the next move in this game of 5-dimensional chess. “I’m Franklyn Froideveaux. A patient of Dr. Lecter’s. Well, I was a patient. I’m seeing someone else right now, because Dr. Lecter had a family emergency and needed some time off. Which is good, he deserves time off. I wish it wasn’t for an emergency though! And I miss seeing him. The new therapist just doesn’t get me like he does. We have nothing in common. I mean, Dr. Lecter and I are both cheese folk! We love cheese and we both get it from here. That’s probably why he’s here now. Is that why? You’d know, since you’re in his basket.”

It’s an accident.

There’s so much desperation pouring off of every word that Franklyn says, a deep seated need to be *tolerated* if he cannot be liked or respected, that Will should have seen it coming. But when he tries to throw his gaze in a safe spot away from Franklyn so that he can (try to) answer the question as indifferently as possible… Franklyn takes a step in that direction, seeking out the validation of his gaze. And he catches Will, their eyes locking.

And there’s nowhere high enough to climb to escape this flash flood.

Neuroticism is destroying my life. I can’t think, I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, I can’t even breathe without constantly wondering what the people around me think of my every move and action. This loneliness is eating me alive. I’m worthless and they know it and I hate them for it. I want them to like me. I want to be like them. I want to ***be*** *them. It’s cold here on the outside of everything and they can make me warm if they just look at me. Notice me, notice me, notice me. I’m screaming on the inside, dying to loved by you. By him. By her. By everyone. But they resist me and so I have to latch on, have to sink my teeth in, have to hold on tight so they can’t abandon me. Love me, love me, love me. You have to love me because if you don’t I’ll hurt myself again. And that’ll be your fault. But you’re perfect and I’m not and that’s why I have to be like you, even if you make me act like this. I need you and I need you to need me too. Stop running away from me, don’t you see how much I want to take care of you?*

“Franklyn.”

It’s Hannibal’s voice that pulls Will from the deep, spiraling pit that is the inside of Franklyn’s mind and he shudders as he turns his head, eyes snapping closed to relieve the

pressure, but all it does is trap what he saw inside of him, make him feel like it like a physical presence.

“What a surprise,” Hannibal continues, sounding like he’s never wanted to see someone less in all his life. “How are you?”

“Oh, Dr. Lecter!” Franklyn practically swoons and Will can see it without looking. Hannibal is a golden idol, shining with promise. Franklyn’s voice hitches with the desire to be seen and loved and wanted and respected by this man more than he does anyone else in the world… but it’s not the first time he’s felt this way about someone, just the latest. “I’m good! I mean, not good. I mean, I’m fine. Like I was just telling your employee, here, I miss having my sessions with you. How is your family emergency going? Is it better yet?”

“My employee?” Hannibal says, voice growing steely with that firm tone of his; the one that dares anyone to argue and forces reality to bend to his whims. “Ah, I see. There must be a misunderstanding, Will is my boyfriend.”

Will’s thoughts come to a screeching halt. What he had been dismissing as a petty thing to argue about; a completely unnecessary display of social standing and power dynamics that rich people do took a one hundred and eighty degree turn and his eyes snap back open, leaving him looking just as shocked as Franklyn does.

“He is?”

Will almost wants to echo the sentiment, but there are currently no words leaving his mouth. All he can do is stare and be painfully aware of the way that Franklyn is now looking him over with renewed interest. Will can practically hear the cogs of his neurosis whirring as they spin, reassessing the situation.

You. You were noticed by Dr. Lecter. Why were you noticed by Dr. Lecter? You are socially below me and it shows. Dr. Lecter won’t notice me. Why are you better than me? I want to hurt you. I want to be you. Look at me and maybe he’ll look at me. Be my friend so I can be closer to him. Get hit by a bus so I can comfort him about it. I hate you. I think I love you. I want to be you. Teach me how.

Franklyn might as well be screaming all those things out loud for as clearly as Will can feel it coming off him in waves.

“Yes,” Hannibal says shortly. Clearly intent on keeping the conversation as brief as necessary. “And as our shopping is finished, we should be on our way. It was nice to see you again, Franklyn.”

“You too!” Franklyn takes that purely professional pleasantry a to heart, practically glowing. “I’m looking forward to our sessions resuming.”

Hannibal’s only answer is a tight-lipped smile that looks more like a grimace. He nods politely though and begins to push the cart (and Will by extension) away.

“Bye Will!” Franklyn calls after them.

Will manages a half-hearted wave but says nothing until Hannibal finds them a deserted aisle and steps around so that he can lean over the edge of the cart, searching Will's expression for something.

"Are you alright?" He asks, and Will doesn't need his empathetic abilities to know that Hannibal is wondering how much of him is Franklyn right now.

"That guy…" Will says, exhaling sharply. "Either wants to have your adopted babies or skin you alive and wear you as a coat. I don't know which and I don't think that he does either."

Hannibal doesn't look surprised. "I cannot say much about him, however I do know what a… difficult perspective he is to assume, and I apologize. If I were to have chosen any of my patients for you to contact, I would not have selected him."

"He is very enamored with you," Will murmurs, tilting his head back a little. "As your boyfriend…should I be jealous? I don't really know how this thing works. I didn't even know we were dating, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal surprises Will by looking a little flustered. "I had…intended to begin our courtship with a more formal request to seek your consent. But you seem to have the power to cause me to act on impulse. I apologize if I've made you uncomfortable."

"Surprised," Will corrects. "Not uncomfortable. I do like you, Dr. Lecter. I just… I've never really dated anyone before. Serious relationships tend not to work out when you can look someone in the eyes and feel everything that they are, even what they're trying to hide. I don't know if they're supposed to move this quickly."

"I would like to properly court you," Hannibal says, immediately. "I have no expectations from you, Will. We will move at the pace that you like. I only hope that you allow me the chance to romance you. If you would prefer otherwise, though, I will refrain and offer only friendship and support. Nothing will change between us."

"Romance is fine, Doctor. Just don't expect me to be much good at it," Will mutters, his heart pounding in his chest as his cheeks tinge pink.

It's only been a day since he told Beverly that he liked Hannibal. She's not going to fucking believe this. She was supposed to – to coach him on all of this. Tell him the right things to say to woo Hannibal. Now here he is, sitting in a grocery cart being asked to let *him* do the romance stuff.

"I believe I'll be adequate enough for the both of us," Hannibal looks unreasonably delighted for someone who just got told that he's allowed to flirt with an unstable ex-profiler who is addicted to adopting dogs. "Now, I believe that we need to…"

Hannibal's phone starts to ring, interrupting him. He makes a face and reaches into his pocket, checking the caller ID before answering.

"Agent Katz, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Holy shit, is Beverly psychic?! Will feels his blood freeze in his veins.

“…I see. Yes, we can. I will have Will call you when we are on the road. Thank you.”

“Hannibal?” Will asks, almost before he’s even hung up the phone. “What’s going on?”

“They found some evidence on Ms. Nichols’ person that may be a substantial lead and she would like the two of us to investigate as soon as possible.” Hannibal sighs and eyes his cart full of groceries mournfully. “I didn’t realize how inconvenient the hours of this job would be.”

“You get used to it.” Will tries to stand, no longer caring about preserving Hannibal’s selections since they won’t have time to buy them anyway. “Get me out of this thing.”

“Another unfortunate drawback. I really must request better benefits next time.”

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes I feel like my filler chapters can be inadequate, but I loved this one. Also S/O to my anxiety about the romance happening too fast in the last chapter only to get a chorus of "FINALLY" from you guys. My original outline didn't have them kissing until at least chapter 30, so I guess my revisions were worth it.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Love me-love me-love me
More than you possibly can
It's not that complicated
No matter what they say
You'll never meet another me

Stalker's Tango by Autoheart

Will's legs are stiff and unforgiving of movement by the time that they touched down in Minnesota; two and a half hours spent cramped in the fully booked economy cabin had somehow been more hellish than he remembered it ever being before; a testament to the fact that he was starting to get spoiled by the first-class treatment he'd been getting from Hannibal. Every aching step through the airport and every burning scrape of blinking over tired eyes just reminded him of the soft bed he'd left at home, a thought that made him more and more agitated as the seconds ticked by.

He feels like an animal caged in his own body, pacing the length of a too-small enclosure and liable to sink his teeth into the first thing that moved in the wrong direction. Mercifully, no one tempts that beast. Not even Jack, who speaks quickly as they wait for the cars sent by the local Bureau to pick them up and drop them off at the motel they'd be staying at.

"Rooms are already booked and paid for," Jack grunts out at them brusquely. "Budget cuts mean we'll have to double up. Bloom and Katz, Jimmy and Brian, Graham and Lecter."

There's the silver lining that Will had been looking for. His outlook on the evening brightens considerably as he can discard the possibility of being forced to share a room with Jimmy and Brian or, God forbid, Jack. His relief at not having to call Jack his roommate seems to be shared by everyone else because no one, not even Brian, mentions the fact that Jack is the only one who doesn't have to share.

"The head of the Bureau over here mentioned a pizza place near the motel. I suggest everyone put in an order, eat fast, and then get some sleep. We're moving out as soon as daylight breaks. We have four sites to cover and not a lot of time before the Shrike strikes again. Oh, and keep your receipts if you expect to be compensated by the Bureau for food purchases. Brian."

Weak and scattered laughter follows that accusation. Will doesn't join in, recognizing it as something he wasn't present for, since he has no frame of reference for the call-out. And, even if he did... it's Jack. He's not going out of his way to encourage any sense of forgiveness or camaraderie.

They more or less disperse following that, lingering away from each other to soak up the space they didn't have on the plane... or, maybe they're all just moved away from Will, as uncertain how to interact with him post-prison stint as he is with them. Jimmy had been friendly enough while they waited to board... but the air of unspoken apologies was as stifling with him and Brian as they had been with Alana and Katz and Will was far beyond the point of wanting to hear it anymore.

So, he's happy to stick to himself.

Or, ah... almost to himself.

There's no warning before Hannibal suddenly tucks him into his side, wrapping his free arm around Will's shoulders. But Will doesn't mind the sudden contact; he's warm and smells familiar as he tucks his head against his shoulder, his face pressing into the front of Hannibal's suit.

"You look exhausted," Hannibal murmurs. "It's straight to bed for you when we arrive."

"If you think I'm missing the opportunity to see your face as you eat pizza, think again," Will mumbles, somehow finding it in him to grin. "I might have to record it."

He doesn't need to look up to see Hannibal's distaste for the idea; he can hear it just fine in his voice. "We will not be eating pizza, William."

"Ooh, hunger strike. That'll teach the FBI not to offer luxury accommodations to its employees."

"I'm not going to starve you, either."

Will opens his mouth to needle him about being so cryptic...but then his spine stiffens, a feeling of being watched sending a sour tingling sensation up the length of his spine.

"Katz, if you don't put that fucking phone down so help me..." he growls out without looking up, to the astonished laughter of Jimmy and Brian.

"How did you - ?!" He hears her sputter, and the feeling goes away as she, presumably, lowers the phone she was trying to take a picture of them with. "Great. Can't get away with anything when he's looking, can't get away with anything when he's not looking."

Despite his exhaustion protesting loudly at him, Will does finally lift his head to shoot a glare at her. She graces him with a beaming, unabashed smile that almost threatens to make him blush and probably would have succeeded if his gaze hadn't found Alana right after.

Unlike the forensics team, there's no trace of humour in her eyes. She has her lips pressed into that tight, thin line that's supposed to put the fear of morality into the hearts of wrong doers.

But before he can decide if he wants to ask her what the hell her problem is or tuck his face back against Hannibal's shirt, two unmarked black sedans pull up and any chance for conversation is missed.

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A short drive and a chorus of half-hearted “good-nights” later, Will collapses headfirst onto the first bed in the room and buries his face into the pillow.

“I hate traveling.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Hannibal responds dryly. Will can’t see him move through the room, but he can hear his footsteps against the carpet… and then jumps in surprise when he feels Hannibal’s hands go to his feet where they’re dangling over the edge of the bed, unlacing his shoes. “You are so poised and measured about it.”

Will’s too taken off guard by Hannibal trying to *undress* him to respond to that. Instead, he tries to carefully withdraw from him. “I can do that. I just didn’t want to, yet.”

“Most hotels change the sheets between guests, but only the bedding “as needed”,” is Hannibal’s response, catching Will off-guard. “I plan to strip both beds of the duvets immediately. And then, perhaps, shower while you eat your dinner. Depending on the accommodations.”

Hannibal finishes unlacing Will’s shoes and sets them aside, moving around to the side of the bed so he can scoop Will up off the bed. He holds him securely with one arm and uses the other to neatly rip the duvet off the bed.

“I am 5’9,” Will grumbles, curling one of his arms around Hannibal’s neck. “I’m a 163 pounds. How do you just lift me up like this?”

“I have carried much heavier,” Hannibal says with a smile, cryptic once again. “Do you really dislike it so much?”

“…No,” Will admits, his face growing warm. “I feel like I should mind it, but I guess I don’t. Why do you like to do it?”

“I enjoy having you close to me,” is Hannibal’s easy answer. Will wonders if he’s ever been flustered once before in all his life, or if he’s always been so unashamedly himself, unbothered by the thoughts of other people. “I’ve always been tactile with my affections… but it feels especially important, having almost lost you before I had you.”

Since Matthew almost killed you. It’s unspoken but still present in the air and Will tightens his grip around Hannibal’s neck at the memory of sharp pain, sticky blood, and the sickening dizziness that came with fading in and out of consciousness.

It feels like a lifetime ago.

It feels like it happened just yesterday.

Linear time stopped having any meaning when he was arrested and being with Hannibal now hadn't resumed it so much as make the lost of time more pleasurable to deal with. Eternity lasts for seconds. Seconds last forever. There's no point in trying to wrap his head around it, the only thing that's felt right in a long time is being around Hannibal.

"You didn't lose me," Will says, since he can think of nothing else to say. "I'm right here."

"Where I will keep you as long as I have a say."

Forever. Another unspoken word. Will's throat tightens as he automatically rejects the thought; refuses to believe in a world where he's wanted, rather than tolerated.

"It's going to be hard for you to shower," he says, weakly, brushing off the silent promise of stability before his brain or heart can get too attached to the idea. "If you plan on keeping me here too long."

"I could manage," Hannibal says, but he seems to sense the way that Will begins to emotionally run for cover. He brushes his lips against his forehead before setting him back down against the bed, on the sheets this time. "But you've had a long day and tomorrow will be longer still. You should eat and then try to get some sleep."

Is Will relieved or disappointed when Hannibal sets him down? It's hard to tell. He's never been so confused by his own emotions before. He says nothing as Hannibal goes to his suitcase… but does start laughing when he unzips it and produces a Tupperware container.

"You packed food? You know restaurants exist, right?"

Hannibal makes a face at that. "I do not trust the quality of products that I did not oversee the preparation of. Too much nutrition is sacrificed for time and artificial bland flavours that appeal to all palates."

"Okay, Chef Lecter. I'm not going to say no to something you made," Will says, making peace before Hannibal can start to think that he's ungrateful or just uninterested. There's no doubt that nothing any restaurant in the area could produce would be better than his cooking anyway. "What's on the menu?"

"Cold tahini noodles with thinly sliced carrots, cucumber, bell pepper, and scallions." Hannibal hands the Tupperware and a plastic fork to Will, clearly pleased that he's not fighting him on it. "I expect you to finish this portion in its entirety. You missed lunch."

"Was this lunch?" Will asks, curious about when Hannibal had time to throw this dish together. "Because, technically, I'm not missing it if it was."

"No," Hannibal begins to select perfectly folded sleepwear from his suitcase. "I made it when we stopped off at home to get our things; it's a simple dish, meant to be served cold, so it would travel well."

Will drops his fork. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Do you not like it?” Hannibal’s expression twitches with disappointment. “If you would… truly…prefer pizza…”

“No, it’s great and if you try to take it away from me, I will cut you,” Will says, picking his fork back up and holding it as a makeshift weapon. “But you also packed our bags and called a dog sitter. We were back on the road in thirty minutes. What are you, Superman?”

Hannibal smiles that thin smile of pleasure that he does when Will has made an astute observation. “The recipe only takes twenty-five minutes to prepare, and our bags were already packed – the phone call was short, as I already had a dog sitter on retainer and have since I took Harley and Winston into our home.”

“Oh.” Will’s never met a real person as organized or prepared as Hannibal is. It’s impressive. And terrifying. “Remind me what you see in me again? It takes me two hours to wake up properly.”

“Eat your dinner,” is Hannibal’s only response as he unzips Will’s suitcase, next, and removes a set of pajamas for him as well. “Then get changed and lie down. No wandering. You need to rest.”

“You missed your calling as a drill instructor,” Will mutters, twirling some noodles around his fork and popping them into his mouth. They’re heavenly, of course, and he tries really hard not to moan out loud about it.

Hannibal gazes at him archly but says nothing else before disappearing into the bathroom.

(***)

Will Graham is an absolute heathen.

Hannibal stares at his sleeping form with equal parts fondness and displeasure when he steps out of the shower to find that, while he did finish his dinner as instructed, he had only removed his pants and overshirt before falling asleep to the canned laughter of a sitcom.

He has half a mind to finish undressing and then re-dress Will, himself, when he begins to stir against the bed as though aware, even while unconscious, that he is no longer alone in the room.

“H’nnbal?” Will slurs endearingly, cracking his eyes open a sliver and making Hannibal forget his previous exasperation.

“Yes, Mylimasis. It’s just me.”

Will hums approvingly and closes his eyes again, extending his right hand out expectantly. Grasping at thin air and seeming to bid Hannibal to come closer. And he does, but only to lace his fingers with Will’s and lean down enough to press a kiss to the back of his hand.

“Almost, Will. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

It’s the worst sort of treason to let go of him again, but Hannibal must. His own stomach is grumbling for lack of food and though the very sight of Will could cure a starving man of hunger pangs… well, they do have a long day ahead of them.

As it is, Hannibal eats much more quickly than he would normally, eyeing the sitcom that Will had been watching with no small amount of distaste (this Ross fellow is very rude – it’s a wonder his sister hasn’t fed him to the others yet) before quickly brushing his teeth and then *finally* climbing into the bed beside Will, ignoring the separate bed completely.

Will’s eyelids flutter, REM sleep seeming to have taken its hold on him. But, even so, he rolls closer to Hannibal, seeking him out even while at his most vulnerable. It’s an intoxicating sight; a moment that Hannibal wants replicated a million times over. To see again and again; to be the only thing that Will knows to reach for when he’s in need of anything.

He’s close now, but not close enough. The bud of a new relationship is easily snipped…and Louisiana is still out there, evidently bidding Will’s return.

Hannibal sighs and kisses both of Will’s eyelids before lying his own head against the pillows and gazing thoughtfully at him. One more tether should be all he needs to bind this restless creature to him permanently. One more snap of the delicate wings that threaten to carry him away from Hannibal.

He just has to find the right moment to strike.

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Hannibal has no memory of the moment that careful planning had trailed off into sleep. One moment he was planning the outline of how he would help Will recover from the tragic loss of a friend – his apologies to Agent Katz, who had done nothing wrong but seem to be who Will was closest to – and in the next came the gentle chime of his phone and his eyes fluttering open to the soft light of a new day as it dawned over the horizon.

A glance to his right tells him that Will is still peacefully asleep, lips parted as he sighs into his dreams. Hannibal is loathe to pull away from him, but he does unwillingly extract himself so that he can turn off his alarm and begin his morning routine. First to his suitcase, where he can extract the carefully wrapped breakfast sandwiches, he had also prepared the day before, and the package of ground coffee he had stowed away in his luggage. Microwaving their breakfast is not ideal, neither is using the complimentary coffee pot here in the room… but

the idea of Will starting his morning off with *fast* food is discontenting enough that he braces himself to work with the tools available to him, inadequate as they may be.

For his part, Will doesn't so much as twitch against the bed until the room is warmed by the pleasant scent of coffee. It's then, and only then, that he begins to show any signs of life.

He cracks open one eye and looks at Hannibal with hopeful suspicion. "Coffee?"

"On the table," Hannibal confirms. "You'll have to pull yourself out of bed if you want it."

That earns him a very exasperated groan. "There's always a catch, isn't there?"

"Such is the unfairness of life." Hannibal sips at his own coffee as he leans back against the counter that the microwave sits in, enjoying the view of Will as he is, sweet with sleep and softened under the glow of the dawn. "Do you want me carry you?"

"Not this time," Will nuzzles his face against the pillow. "I'll get up in minute."

There's no time to argue the sincerity of that statement. A knock on the door interrupts Hannibal's disbelief.

"Go away, Jack." Will mutters, too softly to be heard by anyone on the outside of the room.

Minnesota has not turned his boy into a morning person. Hannibal feels practically flushed with amusement as he goes to open the door and finds Alana standing there on the other side, not Jack.

"Alana," He greets her warmly, content to leave the door most of the way open and allow the harsher, unfiltered light of the day bring Will into sharper relief. "Good morning. I've just finished brewing some coffee if you'd like some."

Will grunts inhospitably at that, though not awake enough yet to fully dispute it. The sound is precisely what Hannibal had been hoping for, watching with concealed fascination as Alana's gaze is drawn to him, where he's still mostly in a state of undress and tangled in the sheets. Next to him is a bed that is clearly untouched and the mental math that Dr. Bloom does is amusing to witness… though not so much as the inevitable conclusion she arrives at.

"Uh…no," Alana says, her answer a moment too late. "No, thank you. I've already caffeinated. Jack just wanted to be sure that at least one of you was up. Will's never been much of a morning person."

Hannibal's jovial thoughts sour considerably. As though she needed to explain that to him… "We're in the process. I've made his breakfast and coffee. I expect he'll get out of bed any day now."

"Go to hell," is Will's sleepy response.

"Well, uh, Jack needs to hand out a few things before we can leave. Your temporary badges and Will's service pistol. Since you're already up and dressed, I guess you can come collect it?"

The strain in her voice is far from unnoticeable, her gaze continuously drifting back to Will's form before jolting back to Hannibal, the frown on her face growing deeper with every second that passes.

"Of course," Hannibal says, smoothly. "If you'll give me just one moment…"

It's a decision born of pettiness; directly bred by Alana's need to explain Will's behaviours to Hannibal, as though establishing that she knows him better than he does. It is to him, as some say, "fighting words".

So it is with exaggerated care that Hannibal lifts Will from bed, ignoring his groans of protest, and carries him to the table. He sets him down carefully in the nearest chair and positions his plate and cup of coffee directly in front of him.

"Drink your coffee. Eat your breakfast. I will be back in a moment, and we will be leaving soon after," Hannibal says for Alana's benefit more than Will's. "Glare at me once if you understand."

Will snorts and tilts his head back, eyes cracked open but squinting as if being awake is too painful to do with wider eyes. "Control freak."

"A very good morning to you too," Hannibal says, pleasantly, brushing his lips against Will's. "Eat."

He doesn't step away until Will has grabbed his coffee, nodding approvingly before finally turning to look at Alana. The fruits of his labors are as sweet as the ones in Eden; the look on her face is one worth remembering. And Hannibal strolls back over as casual as can be, smiling brightly.

"Shall we? I don't want to keep Agent Crawford waiting much longer than necessary."

Chapter End Notes

When will these filler chapters end, you ask? The answer is never. There is no plot, only Zuul. (Actually we'll be back to major content as of Chapter 24. I just think we need domestic boys in between traumatic incidents. Hang in there, ducks.)

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's not that complicated
No matter what they say
I'll never meet another you
It's not that difficult
To get my head around
I'll never meet another you

- Stalker's Tango by Autoheart (Part 2)

As soon as the door shut behind them, Alana spun on her heel and fixed Hannibal with a glare that might have reduced a lesser man to ashes – but a lesser man he is not, so he simply stares back at her.

“Alana?” He asks, his voice painfully polite.

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?”

Her condemnation of him is hardly more than a whisper, her voice rough with the strain of her righteous fury, but it almost seems to echo throughout the entire parking lot anyway as her eyes flash and her face splotches with anger. In this moment it does not seem beyond her power to call down a bolt of lightening from the sky and end his existence in one furious flash of energy… and it is all Hannibal can do not to smile in the face of that rage or openly show his fascination.

“You’ll need to be more specific,” Hannibal says, still feigning ignorance. “What have I done to upset you?”

“No. You don’t get to do that. Don’t you *dare* act like you don’t know what I’m talking about,” Alana teeth clack together as she bites out each word. “you told me that you weren’t attached to him and that you can’t compromise professionalism. The – the public canoodling was one thing. I made excuses for that, for *you*, when Beverly and the rest of them started asking questions. I told myself that you wouldn’t take advantage of Will like that. That you wouldn’t hurt him. And you’re sleeping with him?! Betraying my trust, betraying his trust… god, I can’t believe you! I should have put my foot down about Will staying with you. I knew that he was too emotionally and physically compromised. I should have told Jack or tried to track down some relative of his. But I trusted you and that was obviously a huge mistake.”

“Alana.” Genuine curiosity leaks into his tone, tainting his bland politeness. “Are you… aware that Will Graham is an adult man?”

Alana stares at him contemptuously. “What?”

“You said that you knew that he was too emotionally and physically compromised,” Hannibal parrots back to her. “That you should have told Agent Crawford as much or contacted a relative. Will made the decision to stay with me of his own volition. I offered, he accepted. He was physically injured at the time, yes, but completely sound of mind. I find it strange that you believe a conservatorship was the true solution.”

“I never said that.” If looks could kill, oh how Hannibal would be reduced to ash by now. “Will might be sound of mind in that he’s not insane by definition, but that does not mean that he’s capable of handling a situation like this in a rational way. Between his empathy and his autism, he can’t socialize like the average adult. And he has a history already of – of echoing people’s feelings or imprinting too quickly on someone that he thinks understands him. And he needs someone who can nudge him back onto the right path and protect him from himself. He should have stayed with someone who can do that for him if you can’t seem to do it.”

“You are speaking of him as if he were a child with an inconvenient crush on a teacher,” Hannibal’s amusement has cooled considerably; irritated on behalf of William now. “Alana, tell me truthfully… do you see him as a capable adult?”

“How can you even ask me that?” Alana folds her arms over her chest, petulant now. “Of course, I do.”

“Capable of making his own decisions?”

“Yes.”

“Then unless you believe you have the divine right to decide which of his decisions are acceptable and which you must “fix” for him, you should have no reason to treat me as though my affections for him are predatory. They are, I assure you, reciprocated.”

Alana makes an infuriated sound in the back of her throat.

“You’ve known him for less than a month. Most of that time he spent in the hospital. I know that Will is an adult and that he can make his own decisions, but I also know that there are plenty of decisions that he doesn’t make for himself; that he comes to by drawing from other people. Continuing to work for Jack, for one.”

She takes a deep breath… and her expression softens.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel that way,” she says, almost apologetically. “I just think… you two are moving very quickly. I’ve never seen you act like this before. You’re usually… much more put together than this. I’m as worried about you as I am him. Don’t you think it’s possible that you’re misconstruing this?”

“As a matter of a fact, I don’t.” Hannibal finds himself glancing downward. His handkerchief is perfectly folded and neatly in his pocket. The lines of his suit are crisp, his shoes are polished, his pulse points are scented with cologne – not a hair out of place. He’s as put together as he ever is. Which can only mean that the mess she’s seeing is Will. “I won’t say that it isn’t a change for me. My romantic pursuits of the past feel…trivial, compared to what

I feel for him. They say love makes a man behave in strange ways. I suppose that could be true."

"The words Florence Nightingale syndrome mean anything to you?" Alana's nostrils flare at the word "love". "You've been taking care of Will practically since you met. It's natural that you'd start to care about him. But you need to think practically. You can't possibly love him, Hannibal. You barely know him. And what happens when you wake up one day, realize that I'm right and go to break things off with him? Everything you've helped him with will go right back to square one."

"William has a frightful habit of accepting it when people attempt to tell him how it is that he feels. It irritates him, but he sees it as an inevitability," Hannibal lowers his tone to match hers. Just as soft, just as sincere. "It is not a habit of his that I wish to pick up. I won't tolerate it. If you have criticisms of my behaviour, I will indulge you and listen. Perhaps even correct it if I am behaving boorishly. But I draw the line at this."

"Will also has a habit of falling for psychologists," Alana snaps, wounded by the corner that she has been backed into; petrified by the idea that she is somehow in the wrong, here. "But at least I had the sense to know that a relationship with him would be detrimental to us both. And that was before he went to prison."

"…I will concede that your judgement is rarely to be called into question," Hannibal muses. "Considering that you are the one who instigated his arrest, I can say that your relationship with him was, in fact, detrimental."

Alana flinches as though he had physically struck her, eyes wide and wounded. "Hannibal!"

"Alana," He parrots back to her, eyebrows raised. "I have no wish no fight with you. Your presence is always one that I have enjoyed. But while I understand that I must have neglected you as your mentor, for you to have come to these conclusions about Will Graham even after knowing him for so long…I have such a low tolerance for rudeness."

Alana turns her face away from him, inhaling shakily. "You two are on a collision course. How am I supposed to stand by and just watch it happen when I don't want either of you to get hurt?"

"I have no desire to hurt Will," in any way that isn't necessary to help him free himself from the bonds that he's stuck in now; the ones that keep him from living to his full potential at Hannibal's side. "And I'm certain he feels the same about me. Perhaps the best thing you can do is be a friend, rather than a moral compass."

Alana's expression pinches. "I think if I start trying to just be human again, rather than the 24/7 psychiatrist, I'm going to collapse under the weight of all this stress I'm compartmentalizing."

An interesting admission. "Does not a phoenix need to burn to ash before it rises again?"

(***)

Will is fed.

Will is caffeinated.

Will is showered.

He's dressed, he has his shoes on, he even tidied up the sheets a little, just to have something to occupy his hands since the dogs are back in Baltimore, and he doesn't have a phone of his own yet. He's done all of this to chew away the endless minutes since Hannibal ducked out with Alana… and he's still alone. Still *waiting*.

It's starting to get under his skin a little. What if something happened? What if the Shrike caught wind of the FBI being nearby and decided to take them out before he could be found out? What if Matthew Brown woke up from his coma and broke out the hospital just to track Hannibal back down?

What if Hannibal is with Alana, realizes that she has feelings for him, and decides that she's the better option?

That thought is both insane and immature, but it's the one that sticks with him the most. Will blanches, feeling guilty about all the times he had ever accused other couples of being overly invested in each other or suggested that jealousy is dramatic. He's only been with Hannibal like that for a day and a half and he's already going off the deep end.

Love is a disgusting feeling underneath all the fuzziness. The feelings of inadequacy that follows in its footsteps is starting to negate any possible benefits of dating.

"You're thirty-two," Will mumbles to himself as he flops down onto the bed, bouncing once before he settles down on his back. "Start acting like it."

The door opens and Will jerks upright so fast that he thinks he gives himself whiplash; his brain definitely comes loose in his skull for a second. "Ow."

His abdomen actually hurts worse than his head. Stitches. Right, he has stitches. He has to try to remember that more.

"Are you trying to break a world record for most hospital trips taken by a single man for one injury?" Hannibal tsks his tongue as he steps into the room, evidentially not as forgetful about Will's injury as he is.

"…Fame is intoxicating," Will says, deciding he likes that version better than admitting that he had *missed* him for the whole twenty minutes that he was out of the room. "Got the badges?"

"As well as your service pistol. Jack says you'll need to load it yourself; evidentially, I am not allowed to carry a loaded gun while on the case." Something about that seems to amuse

Hannibal, though Will can't imagine what. Probably something about him being allowed to use a gun… "He also gave me the address of the site that he would like us to look into. The adventure is yours and mine today."

"It might be a little generous to call it an adventure… but at least we're not doing house-to-house interviews." Will forces his fingers not to tremble as he takes the gun into his hands. It's been… a while since he's had to carry one of these. Longer still since he had to use one on duty. He hasn't fired a gun since he was still a cop in Louisiana and, even now, it doesn't feel right in his hand.

Too easy to take a life with one of these. Too indifferent.

But Hannibal is going to be there with him. Completely unarmed. And Will knows better than to assume the best of any situation, even one as dull as going through construction site paperwork. So, he takes the box of bullets and begins to load it.

"If I have to use this, you should start moving in the opposite direction of me and whatever I'm shooting at," Will says, quietly. "I'm not a very good shot."

"Strange. You previously worked Homicide in Louisiana, did you not?" Will turns his head, startled, but Hannibal only smiles. "I did have to do some research before I first spoke with you."

Right. "Yeah. Started as a beat cop right outta high school, because you didn't need any schooling for it. Worked my way up so I could pay for college myself. Daddy kept talking about selling his boat or the house to get me a diploma, but I wouldn't hear it."

"You struggle with aim but managed to work up to homicide?"

"I passed all the accuracy marks at the gun range. Tested well. Up until the day that I was staring down a guy with a knife. He was more of a danger to himself than he was anyone else. I could feel it. I tried to talk him down. I didn't want to fire on him. But my partner got antsy and drew his gun after I put mine down. Next thing I know, there's a knife in my shoulder. Scar tissue on the rotor cuff pretty much ensures that I don't ever hit anything right with a bullet."

Will shrugs, feeling for the tightness that he rarely notices anymore.

"What happened to him?" Hannibal asks, suddenly. "The man who stabbed you?"

"He never got the help he needed."

Will holsters his gun, trying not to frown at the weight of it at his hip. So familiar yet so strange…

"Rich dad," he explains, when Hannibal just seems confused. "Kid needed therapy. He only provoked us because he wanted it to end. But the dad just bailed him out. I…tried to keep in contact with him. Tried to help. But he didn't make it to his next birthday."

It hurts Will to think about, even after all these years.

“I quit after that.” Will hums, trying to move past the subject a little faster. “Felt too guilty to keep going. Started working on motors instead. Less haunting that way.”

There’s something thoughtful in Hannibal’s expression when Will meets his gaze, but nothing that he can see or feel beyond that. Sometimes it’s like Hannibal is just out of reach… other times he thinks he’s seeing too much when their eyes lock. He’s an enigma.

“We should probably get going,” Will says, his brain too full of the echoes of blood and frustration to linger on the subject. “Long day of boring field work ahead of us.”

“I, for one, am anticipating an interesting afternoon,” Hannibal opens the door for Will, who ducks out into the early morning air. “Peeking behind the curtain. Curious how the FBI goes about its business when it isn’t kicking in doors.”

“…Start lowering your expectations,” Will warns, shoving both hands into his pockets. “Then lower then further than that.”

(***)

“I thought you might be exaggerating,” Hannibal sets aside another resignation later, his lips set into an expression of clear discontent. “But this really is quite dull.”

Will tries not to laugh as he picks up another letter of his own, skimming and then discarding when nothing jumps out at him, glancing back at the secretary who let them in before answering.

“It could be worse,” Will murmurs, too quietly for her to hear. “We could be working with Jack right now.”

Dixie, the woman who let them in, is distrustful, but not unaccommodating. Two things that make her smarter than most of the people that Will has ever had to deal with through his work with the FBI. She might not have asked for their badges (a bad move, in his opinion) but she doesn’t leave them alone in the room like most secretaries would. Just sits at her desk and watches intently as they go through the files she brought out for them, speaking quietly into a phone that she has pressed to her ear.

“Two fellas from the F.B.I. They’re going through drawers now. Putting papers in file boxes. Yes. They’re taking things. No. They didn’t say whe -- Yes, they can.” Dixie’s eyes narrow and she tilts the phone away from her mouth. “What did you say your names were?”

It’s too late to ask that question. Partially because Dixie would already be dead if they had ill-intentions because she already let them into the room. But mostly because Will finally finds something of note and there’s only one name he cares to give.

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” He reads out loud.

Dixie doesn't disappoint. "One of our pipe threaders. Those are all the resignation letters. Plumbers' union requires them whenever members finish a job." Then, back to whoever is on the other end of the line. "I'll call you back…"

Will stares down at the paper in his hands. The resignation letter is short and to the point; the brief words of a man who is used to traveling for work. It's not dissimilar to the ones that Will's own father would submit whenever it was time for him to move on from one job site to another. But… there's something about it that makes the tip of his tongue feel heavier; weighed down with the breath that comes before an accusation.

"Did Mr. Hobbs have a daughter?" Will asks, trying to imagine the hand that typed that this letter.

"Might have."

Dixie is rapidly falling from grace. But Will isn't ready to give up on whatever usefulness she might have left in her so easily.

"Eighteen or nineteen, windchaffed? Plain but pretty? She would have dark hair. About this tall."

"Maybe. I don't know. I don't keep company with these people."

These people. People who wander from place to place looking for work. People who come in, keep their heads down, and leave when the job is done. People who don't make waves, who don't get overly friendly, and who try very hard not to make a lasting impression on anyone they come across. That's the implication behind Dixie's words, as loud as if she'd screamed them, but it's not a condemnation. Lots of ordinary people live that way. Will's Daddy, his granddaddy, even Will himself before he settled on teaching…

It doesn't have to mean anything. But Will's fingers tighten on the letter as if digging into Garrett Jacob Hobbs' skin itself. Keeping him from slipping away.

"What is it about Garett Jacob Hobbs you find so peculiar?" Hannibal asks, drawing him back into reality.

"He uh, he left a phone number. No address."

"And therefore, he has something to hide?"

Will's face burns and resentment coats the back of his throat. This is the part of the job that he always hated the most; trying to explain the feelings in his gut; the instincts that guide him to make the jumps that he does. The writing on the wall is only ever legible to him and everyone else stares in either wonder or suspicion as he tries to help them read it too.

He doesn't want it to be like that with Hannibal. But maybe some things are just inevitable. Death, taxes, and not being understood.

"Everyone else left an address," is all he says, not wanting to put too much meaning into it. There's no guarantee that he's right. This could just be a moment of forgetfulness on Hobbs'

part. Will’s rarely wrong about anything… but it’s not impossible.

Still, he doesn’t want to look at Hannibal and see if he’s looking back at Will with uncertainty or – or whatever else there might be that Will wouldn’t like. The list is too long to parse right now. He turns back to Dixie, the lesser of two possible evils.

“Do you have an address for Mr. Hobbs?”

Chapter End Notes

There are two wolves inside of me. Both of them say "upload as soon as you're finished writing. we love validation". I have no self-control. But two small chapters count as one big one, right? Right.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And then the soldiers that came
Took us away
Where the sky ain't blue
It's too late, we've all been burned at the stake
It's too late, we are burned in your fire

- Soldiers Came by Walter Sickert & The Army Of Broken Toys

"Garrett Jacob Hobbs, huh?" Beverly's voice crackles through the speaker along with the quick and quiet clicking of fingers against a keyboard. "I can run his name through the database and see what comes up, but if he doesn't have a criminal record this is going to take a lot more digging. I – fucking fuck this fucking piece of – oops, sorry."

Will tilts his head back so that it's resting against the sun warmed leather of the passenger seat, grinning. "Having trouble, Katz?"

She growls with frustration. "Here I was thinking that being parked in the local HQ would be way more fun than sorting through old files at construction sites, but nothing here is set up the way I like it. Even the desktops are out of whack. I don't suppose you can give me anything else to work with besides his name?"

"I've got a phone number and a last known residence."

"That'll help narrow it down. What's up with this guy that your spidey-sense is tingling, anyway? Did he walk around work wearing an "I-heart-cannibalism" sweatshirt?"

"He just…" Will glances over at Hannibal, who's sitting in the driver's seat like he's never wanted to be anywhere else in the world, content to be a silent audience to the phone call. "… broke pattern. Look, we just need enough to figure out if he fits the profile. Most importantly if he has a college-bound daughter who has all the same characteristics as the missing girls."

"I'm on it like glitter at a pride parade. Just text me that address and phone number and I can start filtering people out. And sit tight, okay? I know Jack would have you on the trail and kicking down Mr. Hobbs' door, by now, but let's try to set a new precedent of taking it by the book. Why don't you guys circle back to the motel? I'll call when I've got something… or if I've got nothing. Either way, we'll figure it out from there."

"Sounds boring and tedious. We'll get right on it."

"Oh, and Will?"

Dread starts to creep up the back of Will's neck at the sudden shift in Beverly's tone. "… Yeah?"

"Judging by the way that Alana was *shrieking* when she stormed back into our room, you have so much to tell me about. So. Much."

"I, uh…"

"Talk to you later. Bye!"

The line goes dead and Will stares at the phone in his hand for a few minutes, blinking slowly, before finally mustering up the courage to look over at Hannibal, who looks *way* too pleased with himself.

"What happened with you and Alana this morning?" Will asks, eyes narrowing. "And why am I being forced to be social about it?"

"Your conversations with Agent Katz and the motives behind them are entirely your business. I wouldn't begin to pry or even assume to have a place or purpose in them." Hannibal doesn't even try to stop looking smug. "I would assume you feel the same about my conversations with Dr. Bloom."

"Make a different assumption. This one is wrong." Will's tone sours considerably as he opens up Hannibal's messages and types a new one out to Katz, punching in the numbers of Hobbs' phone and address in from memory. "Because your conversation with Alana is bleeding into future conversations I'm apparently having with Beverly, and I'd like to know what I'm walking into."

"Ah, this is simply a precautionary measure?"

"What else would it be?" Will's a little too defensive when he bites those words out and he knows it; can feel it in the way that his shoulders tense and see it in the way that Hannibal's eyes glow a little brighter with unconcealed amusement. "…You think I'm being jealous, but I'm not. I just don't like being blindsided. Social interactions are hard enough when there *isn't* a secret that I'm not in on."

Nice save, Graham. Almost completely believable.

"There is no secret," Hannibal seems to take pity on him, smoothly putting his phone back into his pocket when Will holds it out to him. "Alana dropped by this morning with the intention of making sure that we were awake and then asked me to meet with Jack for the things we'd need to make our day successful. And during the walk to meet him, she inquired about the nature of my relationship with you."

That dread that Will had felt when Beverly's tone shifted comes back in full force and hits him like a punch to the gut, threatening to knock all the air out of his lungs. The fear that makes his blood run cold has no rationality connected to it; no basis that exists in this reality or even the next one.

It's only Alana's tenuous connection to the feeling of having the rug pulled out from under his feet and everything he's ever cared about suddenly yanked out of his reach that makes him want to run for cover and wrap his arms around everything he's gotten back since he was released from the BSHCI; to refuse to let them start taking it again.

He forces himself to exhale. To relax his shoulders and keep his eye from twitching. "And?"

"And I suggested that our relationship was, in fact, none of her business. Despite what ethical or personal concerns she might have about it."

Will inhales wrong and begins to choke on his own saliva. Coughing violently, he twists in his seat and sputters. "Ethical???"

That, if nothing else, finally seems to dull the amusement in Hannibal's eyes; concern quickly replacing it. "Will? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Will says, hastily. "What did she say exactly?"

"This topic is upsetting you," Hannibal looks away from him and pulls the keys to the Sedan from his pocket, putting them in the ignition and bringing the car to life. "Perhaps we should talk about something else."

"…Okay," Will leans back against the seat again, folding his arms over his chest and staring out the window as Hannibal begins to pull out of the parking spot. Dixie stands in the doorway of the trailer, watching them go. No doubt considering this the most exciting day of her job yet. "…Was she mad because she has a crush on you?"

"Will."

"Beverly's going to tell me anyway, if she knows." Will can't seem to dislodge his teeth from this topic. "I'd rather hear it from you."

"She was upset because she thinks that you are not psychologically capable of withstanding a relationship at the moment and believes that we are moving too quickly into things. She had… suspicions about my feelings for you when she saw me holding your hand when you were in the hospital and though I was honest about my feelings being purely platonic at the time, she sees this progression in our relationship as a betrayal." Hannibal shoots Will a semi-exasperated look. "Are you content now?"

"A little," Will doesn't uncross his arms. "At least I'll know what ammunition she's bringing to the conversation when she corners me."

That seems to surprise Hannibal. "You expect that she'll bring the argument to you, next?"

"You don't?" Will could laugh if there was anything remotely funny about this. "C'mon. It's Alana. She's not letting one losing argument keep her down."

Then, quieter and mostly to himself, "Louisiana is looking better and better. I could get an electric fence. Leave it on all the time."

“I’ve never been,” Hannibal says, making Will aware that he can, in fact, hear him even when he’s talking to himself. “What about it attracts you so?”

Will’s face grows hot. There are probably better things to say in front of your new boyfriend… “…It’s hard to explain.”

Or just better if he doesn’t. It feels cruel to admit that the idea of moving back to Louisiana had never actually fully left his mind, not even as his feelings for Hannibal started to develop.

“Try. I’m curious.”

Looks like he’s not getting out of this hole. So, he might as well keep digging. Maybe help Hannibal understand why he wants to go… help him understand it if Will does run.

“It’s the only place I have good memories of, anymore.” Will’s throat tightens around the words, making them hard to get out. He looks back out the window and watches the trees that whip by. “Virginia was home for a long time, but it just can’t be anymore. And most of my time in Maryland was spent in prison. The last time I remember feeling genuinely happy was when I was living at home with Dad. I guess I just want that back.”

Will unfolds his arms so he can rub the palms of his hands against the fabric of his jeans, letting it scratch against his skin and ground him in the moment before he can fall too deeply into memories of the drowsy heat of late summer evenings and the sound of his father blowing into empty jugs of moonshine to make “music”.

“It is often said that those who have experiencing ongoing trauma feel unsafe inside their own bodies when it is over as if the past is alive inside of them and continuing to consume them. The effects of trauma change the essence of a person; bleeds into their DNA and forces a metamorphosis, not unlike the caterpillar that retreats into its cocoon and dissolves under the pressure of forces beyond its control. It is reshaped by evolution and leaves all that it was behind as it begins life with new eyes. Tell me, Will, do you long for the time before the cocoon when you were a child? Or do you dream of beginning a new life, perhaps taking on the role of the father in your memories?”

Will takes a second to parse the meaning behind that heavy handed metaphor, shifting in his seat with discomfort as he thinks of the rose-tinted memories of Louisiana. He’s not a child when he thinks about the safety he could find there… but being the “father” that he remembers isn’t quite right either.

“I don’t know, Dr. Lecter,” Will says, slipping back into the professional moniker since it seems he’s being analyzed again. “I don’t have the pedigree to be a father. I couldn’t willingly pass on whatever is wrong with me to someone else. And even if that wasn’t something that scared me… children are so small for so long. I’d be terrified of fucking them up or breaking them.”

“You made a living shaping minds before you were arrested, did you not?”

Will snorts. “I made a living lecturing a room full of twenty-somethings with glazed over eyes… but point taken. I guess the older ones aren’t as terrifying to deal with. At least they

mostly understand what they're feeling and won't project it as a means of survival."

"I think you are severely underestimating yourself," the car comes to a sudden halt and Will is surprised to find that they've made it back to the motel; his vision had glazed over sometime back there, tangled up in memories of Louisiana despite his best attempts to say present. "However, it's a conversation we'll table for now, as it seems someone else wants my attention."

Hannibal's phone is buzzing. Will watches with curiosity as he pulls it from his pocket, then makes a face as the contact flashes on the screen. Jack. Of course.

"I'll have to take this. Why don't you begin heading inside?"

"Sure," Will agrees, happy to be as far away from the sound of Jack's voice as he can get. "Just don't let him talk forever. I don't have my dogs and I'm going to need you to compensate for the lack of full body cuddling."

"Oh, horror. I should have read my contract more clearly."

Will resists the urge to stick his tongue out at him, feeling stupid for how childish that instinct was, and just snatches the key from Hannibal's hand instead and climbs out of the car on stiff legs, wondering if there will be time for a nap before Beverly has any details on Hobbs.

(***)

"Hello, Agent Crawford," Hannibal doesn't answer his phone until the third ring, watching as Will disappears into the motel room. "My apologies, I only just put the car in park."

"It's no bother, Dr. Lecter," Jack answers, his voice unusually jovial. Delighted by *something* and, if Hannibal was a betting man, he would put all his chips down on Will's hunch about Garrett Jacob Hobbs. "I'm only sorry about my poor timing. I've just joined Agent Katz at the field office here in Minnesota. She's on the line with an agent from Quantico who helped us shave a little time off our investigation into Hobbs – he's looking like a perfect fit for that profile that Graham drafted up. He's a construction worker who floats from site to site. No criminal history but tagged in plenty of photos on Facebook that show he's a hunter and that he's got an eighteen-year-old daughter named Abigail. Can you guess what she looks like?"

Hannibal doesn't need to guess. "Wind chaffed skin, dark hair, and blue eyes?"

"Bingo. Just like every missing girl on our list. Just like Elise Nichols," Jack sounds as thrilled as Hannibal has ever heard him. "It looks like he only lives about seven minutes from the motel, making you and Will the closest to him. It sounds like you just settled in, but I would appreciate if you two would head out. Just get the interview started; let Graham get a feel of him. If Will's even half as good as he used to be, he won't need long before he knows

if this is the man we're looking for. Just keep him talking until the rest of us can get there and I'll make the official arrest."

"Of course." Hannibal stares ahead without seeing the dismal parking lot or the sun that's only just reached its height in the sky. They had set out so early that morning has hardly begun… and it's only now that things are getting interesting. No wonder Will spoke of this job as being tedious. "We'll head right over."

"Excellent. See you soon, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal hangs up without much more ceremony, slipping his phone back into his pocket and glancing into the rearview mirror to look at the door to his and Will's motel room, again, finding that it still shut and the curtains are drawn. Certain that Will is tucked safely out of sight, it's then and *only* then that Hannibal lifts the center console and presses down on the bottom, allowing the secret hatch to lift with a near silent *hiss* and reveal the burner phone that he kept with him for emergencies.

A loose interpretation of the word sends him reaching for it, today. Louisiana is a fragile dream crafted entirely of smoke in Will's mind. But still, he reaches for it, fingers curling as if he can catch some part of the fantasy and make it real.

If Will is looking outward for the answer to his desperation for a new beginning, Hannibal can never be certain of his hold on him. As long as he dreams of Louisiana and imagines the picturesque lifestyle that he imagines his father must have had, then he'll never be fully in the moment with Hannibal.

The simple answer of killing one of his friends in order to make him need Hannibal more than he does now is not the correct answer. The loss of someone in this circle of mismatched 'friends' might only chase him further away. Will Graham cannot withstand another loss.

A gain, however? That's another matter entirely.

Will negated the idea that he could be a father and yet there was a spark of interest in his eyes. A moment of quiet longing for simpler life than the one he believed he was meant to live. It was the same spark that had flared when he spoke of the child that he couldn't save with such longing; it was a black mark on his personal ledger against himself. A sin he held himself accountable for to this day. That boy was Will's shattered teacup, a moment he longed to reverse.

And Hannibal could bring it together for him. Create a new moment; a second chance. If anyone deserved it, it was Will Graham.

The line rings and then crackles as someone picks up.

"Hello?" A young woman's voice, both cheerful and curious about who would be calling this early.

"May I speak to Mr. Garrett Hobbs, please?" Hannibal asks, his voice low and pleasantly polite.

A pause, then affirmation. “Just a second.”

Her voice grows distant as she calls for her father. And Hannibal waits, his gaze watching the blinds on the window, seeking out any tell-tale shadows to warn him that someone was approaching.

“Hello?” A gruffer voice draws Hannibal’s attention back.

“Mr. Garrett Jacob Hobbs?”

“Yes.”

Tension drips from that one word. Hannibal can practically see the white skin of bloodless knuckles as he grips the phone; a faceless man bracing himself for the worst, knowing that this is the end of the dance that he’d been doing around law enforcement.

“You don’t know me, and I suspect we’ll never meet. This is a courtesy call. Listen very carefully. Are you listening?”

“…Yes.” Garrett Jacob Hobbs breathes, the air hitching in his throat as panic really begins to sink in.

And Hannibal smiles. “They know.”

*

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*

Garret Jacob Hobbs lives in a very unremarkable house; mass-produced to look aesthetically like every other building in the neighborhood. The only variation to be found as far as the eye could see is the colour scheme of each home, but even that borders on identical in influence; all kept within the same palette. Dull, uninspired, and unassuming. No one would suspect evil to reside behind these doors anymore than they would expect it to live inside of Hobbs. Hannibal knows that in the weeks to come, there would be articles about the “man next door” who had been the perfect neighbor up to the moment that he slaughtered his family.

He looked forward to reading them.

In the passenger seat, Will pops an aspirin into his mouth and swallows it dry, his expression pinched with displeasure. He had been unenthusiastic about their return to the motel being so short-lived and even less pleased that they were being called upon to interview Hobbs after all.

“Whatever happens, stay behind me.”

“We’ve only been asked to interview him,” Hannibal reminds him, easily feigning ignorance of any possible danger. The burner phone he had used to call had already been dismantled, the chip dropped down an irrigation grate in the parking lot of the motel and had likely traveled miles away by now. “Are you expecting a struggle?”

“He’s going to run,” Will says shortly as he unbuckles his seatbelt. “The second he realizes that we’re feds, he’s going to make a break for it. I – I know his type. He’s known since he started that this wasn’t sustainable. That he would be caught eventually. And he’s not going quietly. He’ll panic and he’ll do whatever it takes to get away. And when that happens, I want you out of his line of sight so you can get his wife and kid out of there while I deal with him.”

“Will,” Hannibal is genuinely aghast at the thought. “You’re still injured.”

“Hannibal,” Will repeats back to him, raising an eyebrow. “I’m the one licensed to carry this gun.”

There’s a moment where they stare at each other, each contemplating the other’s next argument and silently thinking of a rebuttal. Hannibal gives in first.

(He knows time is of the essence.)

“Let us hope that it doesn’t come to that,” Hannibal says, unbuckling his own seatbelt and opening his door. “Shall we?”

“We don’t have a lot of other options.”

Will sounds much more tense about the looming house interview than he did about the idea that Garrett Jacob Hobbs may become violent with them. The anticipation of the moment ahead coupled with the look of dread on Will’s face almost makes Hannibal lose his composure.

“It’ll be alright,” Hannibal says, instead of giving into the urge to laugh. Decades of practice save him from the giddiness that Will Graham inspires in him. “Jack did say that they would be right on their way. They can’t arrive long after us. Evidentially, all we have to do is keep him -”

The front door bursts open before they’ve made it all the way up the walk and out comes a woman, stumbling as though she had been shoved hard from behind. She only makes it half a trembling step before her legs give out beneath her and she tumbles gracelessly down the concrete steps, streaking the surface of them crimson with the blood that’s pouring from multiple wounds on her body.

The door slams shut again behind her with a deafening bang, but Hannibal doesn’t have the chance to catch a glimpse of who he is sure is Mr. Hobbs, because Will *bolts* forward without a second to spare, running headlong into danger for the sake of a life that had ended long before they had pulled into the drive.

(What a brave boy. What a reckless one.)

“Will!”

He doesn’t answer Hannibal. Just drops down to his knees and tries to attend to the woman with what must very limited knowledge of CPR. His hands flutter over her, unsure which wound to apply pressure to when there are so many freely oozing blood. The woman, in her terror, clutches at his wrist and stains his skin red.

“Hannibal,” Will says, reaching out desperately with his free hand. “Hannibal, can you?”

‘*Can you save her?*’ is the question that Will can’t seem to finish. *Can you undo the damage that’s been done here?*

Hannibal feels nothing at all as reaches down and pries Mrs. Hobbs’ grip from Will’s wrist and pulls him away from the body. She’s nothing to this plan; nothing to this new life that Hannibal has in store for them. Her eyes dance with the last remnants of life, pain and fear glowing in the depths of her gaze but whatever she is seeing is beyond them as she tries to wheeze out her last words.

“Don’t look,” Hannibal says, forcing Will to turn his head away so that he can’t be dragged down with her when she chokes out her last breath. “Don’t look, Will. There’s nothing we can do.”

“Fuck!”

Will wrenches himself free of Hannibal’s grip and scrambles to his feet. He nearly trips over himself as he hurries to the door and before Hannibal can catch up and *stop* him, Will runs at the door with all the speed he can muster and slams his shoulder into it. A vicious crack sounds out and Hannibal can’t tell if it came from Will’s shoulder or the frame, but his boy does turn several shades paler as he tries to do it again.

Hannibal is faster this time. He stops Will. “Let me.”

Breaking through a door is like riding a bike. You never forget the sweet spot where the frame is at its weakest or the tell-tale crumble of wood bending to an unstoppable force. The door gives away in splintering pieces, not quite falling completely off the hinges but opening enough for Will to dart past Hannibal and force his way inside.

Hannibal isn’t far behind, though he moves a lot less urgently, keeping pace with Will even as he finds himself admiring the blood splatter on the wall and the pools of it on the floor. Mr. Hobbs had clearly taken Hannibal’s warning to heart.

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs?” Will calls out, his voice hoarse and his hands shaking as he draws his gun and holds it out in front of him, stepping from what looks like a more formal dining room and into the kitchen. “F.B.I…”

He stops cold in his tracks and Hannibal nearly collides into him. It’s lucky that he’s taller than Will, or he might have missed the sight that was waiting for them. Abigail Hobbs, a young girl with dark hair and light, tearful eyes standing with her back pressed against her father’s chest and her chin tucked down as she tries to protect her throat from the knife that

he's slashing at her with while he sobs. Mr. Hobbs hands are shaking too much to do more than shallowly cut her as he saws back and forth.

Shame. Hannibal had hoped she would be smart enough to run. Or at least quick enough.

And Will fires.

He hadn't been lying about his poor aim. The first bullet lodges into Garrett Jacob Hobbs' exposed chest. So do the second, third, and fourth that follow as Will numbly keeps pulling the trigger, again and again. The same adrenaline keeping him shooting as what keeps Mr. Hobbs standing and desperately trying to kill his daughter; to save her from the life she'll live once he's gone, forever branded by the decisions he made.

Every shot that Will fires and every cut of the knife against the girl's throat… it's all out of their control. Tied up by strings of fate.

Hannibal is the scissors. He grabs the gun and stops the hammer from falling as Will goes to fire again, just as Hobbs cuts deeper into his daughter's throat and finally succumbs to the bullet wounds he's sporting, somehow still breathing despite the ten rounds of ammunition that Will had buried into his chest.

And Will – oh, Will.

He keeps trying to pull the trigger, seemingly unaware of Hannibal's interference.

"Will!" Hannibal speaks sharply to him, managing to pry the weapon from his hands and let it clatter to the floor. There's blood splattered across his face, clouding his glasses. "Will, that's enough."

"Hannibal?"

Will drops to his knees. For a second, Hannibal wonders if he's succumbed under the weight of stress and passed out, but then Will scrambles through the blood on the floor and presses his shaking hands to Abigail Hobbs' throat, trying to stop the bleeding.

"Hannibal!" Will says again, his voice more desperate now. "Hannibal, I can't – I don't know what I'm doing!"

Will draws Abigail up into his lap, holding her carefully as blood oozes between the cracks in his fingers and when Hannibal hesitates, it's only so that he can commit this moment to memory; to place it in his mind palace so that he can return and paint this moment, immortalize it as it's meant to be. Will Graham as the avenging angel of death, desperately trying to give life so soon after taking it.

It's glorious.

"See?" Garrett Jacob Hobbs wheezes from the corner of the kitchen where he lay dying. "See?"

And Hannibal does.

He sees his mongoose, he sees the snake, and he sees the tether that will bind Hannibal to him for a long time to come. He sees and he doesn't look away again as he drops to his knees beside Will and pushes his hands out of the way to replace them with his own, applying the right amount of pressure to staunch the bleeding without suffocating the girl. He looks up, expecting to see Will watching him… but his eyes are curiously blank. Glazed over. He's losing himself in this moment, returning to his mind to retreat from the horror that it cannot absorb.

"Will?" Hannibal says his name softly. Tenderly. "Will, come back to me now."

He twitches, eyes momentarily focusing, but he says nothing. It's all the sign that he needs though.

"Will, take the phone from my pocket. Call an ambulance and Jack. We need to move quickly if we're going to save her.

Save her.

Those are the magic words that seem to spark some life back into him because Will moves quickly now, reaching into Hannibal's breast pocket with his bloodstained hand and quickly punching in the number for the emergency services, hovering over the two of them. Hannibal, as he stops the flow of blood… and Abigail, who stares at her father's corpse even as the life ebbs from her body.

There's betrayal in her eyes. Fear and sadness. But also…relief. The kind that follows an expected blow when it finally lands. Death had been looming over her for a while, now, and its arrival is the answer to the question that she's been too frightened to ask.

Hannibal carefully repositions her so that she's no longer looking at her father. Their eyes meet and Hannibal knows that Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn't work alone.

And as if aware of the shame in her eyes, Abigail closes them and grows deathly still.

Chapter End Notes

Hello from 4am. I haven't gone to sleep yet because I was too busy writing this.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Take second best
Put me to the test
Things on your chest
You need to confess
I will deliver
You know I'm a forgiver

- Personal Jesus (Cover by Mindless Self-Indulgence)

He looks like a Jackson Pollock painting.

Or, at least, a ghoulish parody of one. There's blood spattered over his nose and across his jaw; flecks of it dried to his glasses and dotting his filed of vision with persistent flecks that he can't quite tune out or look past. He's as artfully dolled up in macabre as a background actor on the set of some slasher film. He looks like *hell*.

Which is fitting, because he feels like hell too.

Will turns away from the car window that he had caught sight of himself in and directs his gaze down to his shoes as he's approached by yet another agent trying to throw his weight around in all directions. The minute that this had turned into a bloodbath, they were no longer colleagues braving the same case; they were too separate teams: locals and intruders.

While Jack Crawford was happy to wax idiotic back and forth with whoever tried to pull rank on the scene, Will was a lot less thrilled. He didn't want to be here, forced to stay on the scene and recount the same story over and over again to every guy who just wanted to look like they were doing something useful.

It was bad enough that he couldn't hop in the ambulance with Hannibal and the girl – Abigail, he'd learned her name was – when they were rushing her away from the scene nearly forty-five minutes ago. Realizing that he couldn't just take the sedan and get as far away from this as the gas tank would take him was another harsh blow.

And now…this.

"Are you Will Graham?"

Will doesn't so much as flinch at the sound of his name, just keeps his eyes focused downward. This one is clearly trying to win the title of best dressed: a tailored dark blue suit, a matching tie, and black shoes that shined like new. His gun and badge are holstered like Will's, but they're out of place on him; starkly contrasting his image as a Ferrari salesman about to walk on camera for a commercial.

"Yes."

"Sean Bennet, F.B.I."

He holds out his hand for Will to take. Will ignores it.

"Aren't we all?"

Agent Bennet makes a clicking sound, snapping his tongue against the roof of his mouth and dropping his hand. "Well, *we* are. From what I understand of this situation, you're not."

"Not officially," Will agrees, fighting to keep his voice level. "But if that's an issue in this case, you can take it up with Agent Crawford. He's the one who brought me on."

"No, no issue at all." Bennet's stab at sounding diplomatic is marred by self-satisfaction. Will gets the sense that he's the first one that Bennet has *successfully* pulled rank on. "We're not here to tell you guys how to run your end of things. Just have a few questions for you."

"Anything new?"

"I'm sorry?"

So's Will, but that's beside the point. "Any new questions? I've already talked to six different people. There's no M. Night Shyamalan twist; the ending is the same every time."

"I know this must be exhausting," Bennet's placating tone doesn't waver. "Having to talk to everyone, wondering why you can't just go home, submit your paperwork, and have a beer. Believe me, I want that as much as you do. But if either of us is ever going to get off this scene, we've got to talk a little. Help each other out, you know?"

Will says nothing. It's safer that way, since the faux comradery that Bennet is oozing now is scraping against his already raw skin like sandpaper. His tolerance for socializing has long since expired. His patience for procedure was left in Baltimore, and his head is *killing* him. Anything that comes out his mouth now is just going to get him put in handcuffs, he's sure of it.

Luckily, Bennet takes his silence as an affirmation of cooperation. "Okay, Mr. Graham. I -"

"It's actually doctor," Hannibal says, appearing behind Will like he'd just materialized out of thin air, scaring the *shit* out of them both. Bennet yelps while Will tenses, every muscle in his body locking down and bracing for an impact that doesn't come. "*Dr.* Graham."

"And you are?" Bennet recovers but some of his friendliness has been lost to surprise.

“Dr. Hannibal Lecter.” Hannibal does reach out and politely offer his hand to Bennet. “I, like Will, have been working this case as a consultant.”

“Two doctors?” Bennet shakes Hannibal’s hand. “All to catch some guy in the suburbs who likes his pork long?”

“Yeah. For some reason, the abductions and murders of teenage girls is a sore spot for us at Quantico,” Will mutters, not at all caring about Bennet’s continued presence as he turns his attention to focus solely on Hannibal. “What happened? Why are you back? Is she okay?”

“Abigail is still in surgery,” there’s nothing in Hannibal’s expression that gives away how well it is or isn’t going, much to Will’s frustration. “When I was no longer able to help keep her stable, I thought it was best that I return here and answer whatever questions I might need to… and make sure that you were alright.”

“Nice partnership,” Bennet interjects, unsubtly trying to bring their attention back to him. “Great timing, too, since I was just starting to talk to Mr, uh, Dr. Graham. Just going over the statements we got from him previously. Since you just got back, I’d be delighted to take yours as well… as well as your contact information. In case we have any follow up questions.”

“Is that necessary?” Hannibal looks mildly surprised. “Jack Crawford already has my information. I’d be happy to give my formal statement, but…”

“With all due respect, this investigation happened in our jurisdiction. And we can’t always rely on internal communication between states.” Will could just gag at the syrupy sweet tone he’s using now. “It’s just a precautionary measure. So we can wrap things up here nice and tight.”

“I trust that Agent Crawford will be open to communication with you,” Hannibal says, pleasantly. “Though I would still be happy to give my statement.”

“Will.”

Oh, thank god. Will has never been so fucking thrilled to hear Alana Bloom calling for him in all his life. Five more minutes of this circular conversation between Hannibal and Bennet and he was going to start walking back to Baltimore.

“I’ve already given my statement. Like six times.” Will mutters, mostly for Hannibal’s benefit now. “If you can’t find it between the agents who talked to me, then we’re not the ones who have organizational issues. Excuse me.”

Will pulls away from Hannibal quickly and half-walks, half-jogs away from the two of them, cutting across the grass to meet Alana were she’s standing just a few feet from the police tape that’s standing as a barrier between the house and the neighbors who had all gathered at the sound of an ambulance and the sight of a coroner’s van.

“Alana,” Will greets her, pinching the bridge of his nose to fend off some of the pressure of his headache. “You wouldn’t happen to be carrying any aspirin, would you?”

“No, sorry.” Alana does sound genuinely sympathetic. “Beverly might. You could ask her whenever she’s done arguing with the local forensics’ team about who gets to take evidence to which lab.”

“Evidence?” Now, that’s the first thing anyone has said to him in almost an hour that genuinely surprises him. “Hannibal and I walked in on him cutting open his daughter’s throat. This seems like a relatively cut and dry case. Hobbs did it.”

“I know that he did,” Alana turns to face him, twisting away from any of the agents or neighbors who might be straining to hear them. “But you know Jack. He thinks that there are still questions to be answered and that Katz can find him some of those answers if we take a few things back to the lab. As long as Beverly keeps herself in check, taking a few things to look over isn’t going to hurt anyone.”

“Jack’s overcompensating,” Will guesses, facing her as well but taking extra care not to meet her gaze. “He got here after the action was over. Barely beat the ambulance. Pretending that there are loose ends that need tying just makes him feel like he’s in control.”

“Is he pretending?”

Alana shifts her weight, her voice doubtful.

“Maybe he doesn’t know what questions are left to be asked, but he knows that there are questions. Do you really feel like this case is over? It just feels… unresolved to me.”

“It’s resolved enough.” Will says, firmly, ignoring the pang of uncertainty that roils through his gut. “Garrett Jacob Hobbs isn’t going to abduct another girl again.”

“You made sure of that.” It rolls off Alana’s tongue like an accusation and she seems to hear that, too, because she quickly backpedals. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. I know that I’m not your favourite person in the world right now, but if you need someone to talk to… about what happened in there…”

“I shot him,” Will says the words carelessly, like there is no weight to them. Pretending not to feel the strain or still hear the echo of every shot he fired. “He was trying to murder his daughter. So I shot him. And I stopped him. There’s nothing to talk about. That’s all that happened; it’s the same thing that any other agent would have done.”

“You’re not any other agent.” Alana straightens her shoulders in that way that she does when she’s ready for a verbal battle. “And – and you didn’t just shoot him. I heard Brian say that he saw multiple bullet wounds on the body before the coroner covered him. Jack is going to ask you about it. Not gently, either. You probably don’t know this, but he’s been under investigation ever since-”

“I was falsely imprisoned, cut open on the floor of Chilton’s office, and almost eaten?” Will’s voice is dry enough to catch fire. “Yeah, I heard. And I know that it doesn’t look great that he can’t solve cases without me.”

“And you should know it doesn’t look great that he brought you back on and you unloaded several rounds into a suspect. You don’t have a history of excessive force, Will.”

“I don’t have a history of facing down men who are trying to cut open their child’s throat, either.”

His bluntness has the desired effect, Alana flinches. And he uses her momentary speechlessness to change the subject, since the other option is walking away and opening himself up to questioning from another agent or, worse, Jack.

“You’re right about one thing. This story doesn’t end with Hobbs’ death,” Will’s gaze drifts to the house as if he can see past the walls on the outside; all the way into the kitchen where two pools of stagnant blood sit side by side. “Whether she survives this or not, his daughter is his last victim. And if she does pull through, there’s going to be a hell of a lot for her to deal with.”

“…I know,” Alana says, quietly. “I already told Jack that I’d go through records and see if she has any family who can take her in if she pulls through. If she does and they live close enough, I can offer my services. I’ve worked with girls her age.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll still offer to help. It just means location won’t be so challenging. Once she’s recovered enough, I could get her transferred to Baltimore. There are hospitals for kids like her. She could finish recovery around people her own age. Make friends. It’d be good for her. She’ll need all the support she can get.”

It’s that tone of sincere compassion in Alana’s voice when she talks about helping Abigail that reminds Will, for a moment, exactly what it was about her that drew him to her in the first place. She does really care about other people. She wants to help wherever she can. Wants to rid the world of evil and nurture all that is good.

It’s her inability to see good and evil as dual parts that hinders her. Unbreakable convictions that can hurt when swung in the wrong direction. Will smiles grimly.

“It’s a nice thought,” he says, as delicately as he can muster. “But I’m not sure you’re the one for the job, Dr. Bloom.”

Alana doesn’t flinch. Maybe she was expecting to hear that. “I made a mistake when I tried to help you, Will. That doesn’t mean I can’t learn from it or that I can’t help other people. My career extends far beyond our friendship.”

“You misjudged a situation and ruined my life, Alana. Feels like you should at least take a refresher course on what it means to be a therapist before you take on the case of the girl whose father was eating people who looked just like her.”

Alana makes a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “And here I thought we were having a nice conversation. How long are you going to punish me for this?”

“My house. My job. My dogs. My savings. It all went away when I got arrested.” Will shrugs his shoulders. “What did you lose?”

“A friend.”

Alana’s voice is whisper soft. Somber with pain and it’s all Will can do not to *laugh.* Maybe the day has been too long. Maybe some part of him shut off before he ever stumbled back out of that house. Maybe it’s the dried blood on his jeans or the flecks on his glasses, but he’s in a place beyond caring. Beyond feeling.

Will meets her gaze and her guilt stays right in her eyes, where it belongs. Not in his head. “I don’t want to punish you, Alana. Not really.”

“Then what do you want?”

Will looks back at the house. Imagines the weight of the gun in his hands and how it felt to shoot Garrett Jacob Hobbs. How every bullet he imbedded in his chest felt righteous. Felt… good. The answer is right there in the horror and bloodshed.

“Justice.”

(***)

A cold wind has kicked up by the time that Hannibal is able to extract Will and himself from the swarm of F.B.I Agents that are still parading around on Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ yard, all buzzing like worker bees without any real direction. Standing, pointing, repeating the same questions… it’s exhausting to witness, even worse to experience, and Hannibal has had enough even before he realizes that Will’s teeth have started to chatter.

However, it is the sound of his growing discomfort that spurs Hannibal into more aggressive action.

“Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says, shrugging out of his coat so that he can drape it over Will’s shoulders. “Will and I will be leaving now.”

“Dr. Lecter, we may need Will to-”

“You have my phone number. You may call if something else comes up, but please refrain from intruding for any matter that is less than urgent,” Hannibal continues to speak, as though Jack had said nothing at all. “Have a good evening.”

“Dr. Lecter!”

Jack can’t afford to do more than hiss his displeasure while surrounded by so many other agents and Hannibal is happy to take advantage of that as he steers Will away from the

crowd, keeping him carefully tucked into his side and gazing ahead with an expression that firmly suggests that anyone who might be inclined to stop them should reconsider it.

“You are rapidly becoming Jack’s least favourite person,” Will says, his words slurring together under what Hannibal is sure is a combination of exhaustion and the weight of ongoing shock. “He wanted me to analyze the scene. Tell him what set Hobbs off.”

“It is good to want things,” Hannibal wastes no time in opening the door of their unmarked Sedan – one of the few that isn’t almost parked on the yard – and ushers Will inside. “Our desires are what make us human. Instinct drives all creatures, but the craving for things beyond survival is what drives us to become more than what we are.”

It’s a worrying sign of how disconnected Will is when he doesn’t attempt to fight Hannibal when he buckles him into his seat.

“So, when we leave Jack wanting… it’s for his own good.” Hannibal finishes, brushing his fingertips against Will’s jaw. “Are you still with me, Will?”

“Where else would I be?”

Where else indeed. In a perfect world, Hannibal would have been able to reap what he had sown in the moments after Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ body finally hit the ground. He would have checked Will for injuries before kissing him – searching for the taste of euphoria on his tongue, because he knows that it was not fear or obligation that urged him to pull the trigger on Garrett Jacob Hobbs again and again.

It was something else. Something more primal. Delayed gratification has its merits, but all Hannibal feels in this moment is impatience and a heady desire to be alone with Will. To taste the fruits of his labors and marvel in what he knows must be the beginning of his becoming.

But there are still miles between them and proper isolation from the rest of the world. He must content himself with one last touch of his hand to Will’s cheek before he withdraws and returns to the driver’s seat.

“Jack’s ire with me for removing you is going to be relatively minor,” Hannibal says, continuing the conversation to keep Will from retreating too far into his own head. “Compared to how he is going to feel when he realizes that you and I have not returned to the motel.”

That does capture Will’s attention. “Where are we going?”

“I’ve found us new accommodations.” Hannibal says, cryptically. Hoping that the mystery will keep the shadows of Will’s mind at bay until he can properly greet them. “I think you’ll like them.”

*

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Hotel Ivy stands proudly in downtown Minneapolis, sporting an insignia that promises luxury accommodations and oozes a pleasant mix of both traditional design and modernity. And while Will's appearance might have been a *shock* to the smartly dressed woman behind the counter, the sight of Hannibal's black American Express card was more than enough reason for her to forget any misgivings she might have had and welcome them warmly to the hotel.

The amenities that this hotel offers are, in Hannibal's opinion, adequate. A full spa, fine dining, spacious rooms – all are enough to survive an extended stay in Minnesota. But it's not his opinion that he made this choice to cater to. It's Will's.

And the look on his face when they enter their room is everything that Hannibal had been anticipating it would be. He *laughs* for the first time in hours and immediately places Hannibal's coat over the back of one of the chairs in the living area of the suite, rather than in the coat closet, the absolute *heathen*. Hannibal's never been quite so pleased to have immediately rescue and properly hang an article of clothing before.

"That one night of motel life really traumatized you, huh?" Will asks as he ventures further into the room, curiously looking over every inch of the space.

Hannibal grimaces. "It was…serviceable. For an evening. But not conducive to a long-term stay."

That draws Will's attention back to him. "Long-term?"

"Yes," Hannibal has no shame and no intention of pretending as much right now. He has every intention of making Will Graham as vulnerable as he's ever been and the only way to ensure a safe enough space to do so is to offer honesty in return. "I thought you might like to linger. Until we know if Abigail is going to survive."

"Oh."

Will's expression becomes inscrutable, his one-word response offering nothing, not even a *hint* as to what he might be feeling.

"Oh?" Hannibal prompts, surprised to find just how much it bothers him when he doesn't know what is happening in that beautiful mind of his.

"Yeah." Will is still looking at the ground. "I'm not used to people being able to read me. Let alone planning something because they know it's what I want, even if I haven't said it. I'm not sure how else to respond. So. Oh."

Pleasure prickles in Hannibal's chest, delighted that he had made the right decision. No longer feeling cowed by the possibility of rejection, he crosses the space between them and pulls Will against him; his chest flush against Will's back. It's a mirror image of how Garrett Jacob Hobbs held Abigail in the moments that he tried to end her life, but Hannibal kisses the top of Will's head instead.

"You don't need to say anything," He promises, his voice quiet. "You do, however, need to get undressed."

Will tenses. “Hannibal?”

“You’re covered in blood,” it’s said gently so as not to startle him. “I was able to clean up a little at the hospital. But you? You need a bath.”

“Right.” Will looks down at himself. At his hands and at his clothes. “I keep forgetting. It’s like I can’t think about it for long before it just slips from my head again.”

“Your mind is attempting to shut out the unpleasantness to protect itself from the reality of the situation. There is only so much horror that can be tolerated in a moment.” Hannibal brushes his lips against the shell of Will’s ear, unable to resist the urge to get closer to him. More sweetly affectionate. “You have been holding yourself together for hours now. Fighting forward through an unimaginable situation without a moment to breathe. I’d like you to rest now.”

“I thought you said you wanted me to shower.”

“I said you needed a bath.” Hannibal corrects, finally releasing him so that he can begin to walk in the direction of the bathroom. “And you’re going to get one. However, I am going to draw it. And then I am going to bathe you.”

He turns his head to look back at Will and finds him blinking slowly, trying to parse the meaning of his words as though he had spoken in Lithuanian rather than English.

Then his face turns red with indignation. “Hannibal, I’m fine. I’m not *helpless.* I can run my own bath and I know how to bathe myself.”

“You can.” Hannibal agrees, speaking with particular emphasis so that there is no room for Will to doubt his words. “I don’t think you’re incapable, Will. I want to take care of you for the joy that I get out of doing so. I want you to rest, and I want you to allow me to help you do so. If you’re uncomfortable, then you can refuse, and I will not press the issue.”

Will chews indelicately on his bottom lip, scraping his teeth against chapped skin and tearing it away in an age-old nervous habit. Confusion still clouds his gaze.

“I don’t want you to treat me like I’m an invalid,” He says, his breath hitching in the back of his throat. “I’m not a basket case or incapable of doing things for myself.”

“I know that.”

“I’m not fragile, either.”

“I know that as well.”

“…Okay.” Will shifts his weight from one foot to the other, his gaze traveling in every direction except to Hannibal. “As long as you know that… and as long as you’re doing this because you want to, and not because you think you *have* to… then I guess I’m okay with it.”

It’s as close to a yes as Hannibal believes he’ll get. The set of Will’s mouth is as near to a “please” as it’ll ever come. Will wants to be taken care of just as much as Hannibal wants to

be the one to take care of him and it's a pressure off both of their shoulders when they come to this agreement. Hannibal feels *lighter*.

"Excellent."

Hannibal starts to head for the bathroom again, only to be stopped by Will's awkward throat clearing.

"Um. All of our clothes are at the motel."

Hannibal doesn't turn back around, just waves his hand dismissively. "I sent a message to Agent Katz, asking her to bring our bags here when she's able. In the meantime, there are complimentary robes you can wear after your bath…or there's always my coat, if you'd prefer."

Chapter End Notes

air horns FILLER CHAPTER FILLER CHAPTER FILLER CHAPTER FILLER CHAPTER.

There's a 95% chance that we'll see Will get a bath in the next chapter. And a 5% chance that it'll start off on a brand new day. And a 100% chance that I'm lying about that 5% chance because I want to see the comments begging me to write about bath time. I'm pretty shameless like that.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cause I want it now
I want it now
Give me your heart and your soul
I'm not breaking down
I'm breaking out
Last chance to lose control

- Hysteria by Muse

The bathroom is hot with sweetly fragrant steam by the time that Will musters up the courage to shuffle through the door, still clad in his blood-soaked clothes but at least no longer *hiding* out in the main part of the suite. But the same bravery that brought him in here abandons him in the next second as he looks past the steam and sees exactly what Hannibal had gotten up to while Will was working on building up the nerve.

Everything is so neat. He might even dare to call it picturesque; Hannibal sitting patiently on the wide ledge of the tub with his sleeves rolled back past his elbows and several little bottles neatly arranged in a row beside him. Complimentary toiletries provided by the hotel, Will assumes. There's a thick layer of foam sitting on top of the water – *bubbles* – and if Will had to guess, he would say that the sweet fragrance in the air is due to some type of essential oil in the water.

It's got all the makings of a luxury spa. And it's set up for *him.* A stab of disbelief pangs through him, quickly settling in the pit of his gut and morphing a sense of unworthiness. This is… wrong. He shouldn't be here because moments like these don't belong to people like him. There's a young woman fighting for her life in a hospital somewhere; the body of a killer with ten bullets lodged into his chest being worked over by coroner alongside the body of a long-suffering wife whose misguided faith or maybe willful ignorance of her husband got her killed.

There should still be suffering because it always lingers in Will's head. No way to shut off the echoes of screams that follow him home from every case that Jack has him work up. It doesn't end; he isn't the kind of agent that goes home, submits his paperwork, and has a beer. He's the kind who settles into nightmares with weary familiarity because those are the only kind of dreams that he has and if he has them, at least he knows he's getting some kind of sleep.

It feels like he's stealing something from someone else, standing here. The distress of his self-loathing makes his fingers twitch and he fusses with the hem of his shirt without actually moving to take it off, very aware of Hannibal's keen gaze on him… and even more aware that Lecter has said *nothing* yet.

"…I think honest communication is one of the prerequisites for a healthy romantic relationship?" Will asks, tilting his head back so he can look at the ceiling. It feels safer than looking anywhere else in here.

"That is a widely held opinion."

How does he sound so smug and so understanding all at once? Will makes a face, his fingers still toying with the fabric of his shirt, thumb absently brushing over a spot of crusted over blood and it is unpleasant to realize that the sensation against his skin is *not* one of the bad textures.

"Then I can honestly tell you that I think I'd be less anxious if you had propositioned me." He tries to force a laugh, to make the admission more casual, but it just gets caught in his throat. "I understand the mechanics of that, at least. This is… a little beyond me."

It's hard to tell if Hannibal is being deliberately obtuse when he innocently inquires, "Have you never had a bath before?"

"Not since I was nine." Will's tone is probably a little sharper than necessary, but he doesn't like this feeling that's growing inside of him. This… weird embarrassment and anticipation of rejection. "And never one like this. It feels like something intimate, and I don't mind that. But I don't know what your expectations are and I'm afraid I'll fall short of them."

He doesn't hear Hannibal stand up; doesn't realize that he's even crossed the room until his hand is pressed against Will's cheek and gently guiding him to meet his gaze.

"Would it help if I told you what I wanted?" Hannibal asks, his accent growing thicker as his tone becomes *husky*. Damn near impossible to even imagine resisting. "If I explained what it is that I'm hoping to gain from you?"

Will's had morphine pumping through his veins, and he still thinks that the relief he feels in this moment is a more powerful drug. He damn near collapses into Hannibal's arms under the weight of it.

"*Yes.*" Will is ready to grasp onto this lifeline with both hands and never let go of it. "Please."

Hannibal's answering smile is as gentle as any expression that Will's ever seen him wear, but there's something in the depths of his gaze that doesn't quite match it; something more intense but not unpleasant.

"First," Hannibal's hands gently push Will to let go of the grip that he has on his own shirt to stop his anxious fidgeting. "I'm going to undress you. Because you can hardly expect to get clean if you're still wearing these soiled clothes."

There are no buttons to fuss with, so Hannibal just neatly yanks Will's shirt off over his head in one fluid motion, taking care to fold it – inside out – and set it delicately on the counter before he kneels down to untie Will's shoes and strip him of his blood-soaked sneakers and socks. They go under the counter, of course, before it's time to move onto the next article of

clothing. His hands go to Will's jeans, next, unzipping and unbuttoning the front of them unceremoniously.

His movements are exaggerated enough that Will knows Hannibal is allowing for any hesitation or sudden change of heart that Will might have… but quickly enough that it's not making him self-conscious or allowing him to overthink things again. He's not really thinking at all even as he braces his hands against Hannibal's shoulders to steady himself and keep from falling as he steps out of his pants, which are then sent to the same counter as his shirt.

But even with Hannibal taking control of the situation and making Will feel a little less like he's in a free fall through the dark and just hoping to land someplace soft, he can't pretend that he doesn't feel *vulnerable* standing there in just his boxers while Hannibal remains mostly dressed. He feels more exposed than if he was all the way naked already and he twitches to get rid of them, to just rip the band-aid off, but Hannibal is faster.

Hannibal tastes like confidence when he kisses Will. Bedrock and iron bars that promise to keep him in place and standing on both feet. It's the heat of dominance without the threat of scarring from the burns if he falls out of line. Control without brutality or *pain.* His lips and his tongue are coaxing, instead, fanning the embers of *need* in Will's gut until he feels like he's about to physically erupt into flames.

His tongue slides against the length of Will's, a sweet and slick invasion. It feels like an invitation for more as much as it does a *goodbye* and Will doesn't know which to expect until Hannibal is slowly parting their lips and reality comes crashing back in, reminding Will of where he is, who he is, and telling him for the first time that Hannibal had managed to get his boxers down from around his hips and to his ankles without Will noticing.

"…Fuck," Will sighs breathlessly, unable to summarize his thoughts in any other way.

Hannibal laughs and presses his forehead to Will's. "Bath."

It shouldn't surprise Will when Hannibal scoops him up into his arms, but somehow it still does. The added vulnerability of being *completely* naked makes his heart drop into his stomach.

"Don't drop me!" He hisses, suddenly terrified of the possibility. The floor does not look like a comfortable place to land.

Hannibal almost looks offended. "I would never."

That's not a promise that he should make or even hope to keep, but somehow it sounds as sincere as any other one that Hannibal has ever made, and Will manages to relax incrementally as he's carried over to the bath and gently submerged into it.

His body has never appreciated hot water more in its life. He gasps with delight as he relaxes into it, shifting to get comfortable underneath a thick layer of bubbles, his tense muscles practically crying with relief as the water licks over him and attempts to soothe the damage of

the day. Jesus, why had he been fighting this? If he'd known it was going to feel this good, he would have just dived right in. Probably in his clothes.

He looks up to find Hannibal staring at him and is surprised to find that he looks just as pleased as Will feels. Now that the awkward part of stepping into a new situation is over, all that's left is Will's curiosity; his wonder about what this situation does for Hannibal that makes him look like that. And why. It's tempting to ask… but Hannibal already said that he would tell him. Giving him time is the least that Will can do.

So, he scoops up a handful of bubbles and blows them in Hannibal's direction, watching as the foam shoots up into the air in a chunk of suds and floats lightly on the draft he created.

"I live here now," Will tells him solemnly.

It has the desired effect. Hannibal smiles at him and settles down onto the edge of the bathtub, reaching out to brush some of the suds off of Will's face.

"I'll have your mail forwarded accordingly," He promises. "The temperature is fine?"

"It's perfect." Hot enough to sting his skin pleasantly, just the way that Will preferred his showers and, clearly, his baths. "What's in here? The water feels…softer than water normally does."

"Diptyque," Hannibal makes the word sound like music. "Bathing oils. This one is composed of almond, argon, and macadamia oils. It's meant to soften and protect your skin."

"My skin is fine," Will protests half-heartedly, even if he can't deny that he's kind of into the way that the water feels like silk against his body. "It does what it's supposed to."

"I've told you before that I am very careful about what I put into my body. I am just as careful about what goes onto it and how I treat it."

Hannibal pulls Will closer to the edge of the tub and grabs an impossibly fluffy washcloth, wetting it and then beginning to gently wipe the blood from his face.

"I don't offer that level of care to many other things. I put myself and the preservation of my life and the freedoms I enjoy in it before most things. However… I find myself with a great deal of compassion for you."

The white washcloth is smeared with pink when it comes away from Will's face. Hannibal wrings it out and sets it aside, grabbing a brightly coloured loofa next. He squeezes a sweet smelling bodywash onto it and wordlessly begins to scrub away at the blood on Will's arm; the smears that could almost be Louise Hobbs' fingerprints.

"You should accept this level of care as being an inevitability. I want you to be as well as I am, if not more."

It's sweet, but Will still grimaces. "I am going to disappoint you so many times."

“I am going to correct you every time,” Hannibal counters. “And take it on myself to treat you as I would like you to treat yourself until it is an instinct ingrained in you too.”

“Control freak.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal concedes to that point with a smile. “But that is only a very shallow part of what I am.”

Will recognizes that as an invitation to ask, so he does. “What’s the deeper end? And does it have anything to do with whatever you’re getting out doing this?”

Hannibal moves the loofa to his shoulders, quiet now. It’s not the silence of someone who doesn’t want or have an answer, though. Will can feel that he’s gathering his thoughts and he’s content to give Hannibal as much time as he needs to do so… or, at least, until the bubbles have mostly gone and the water is cold. Whichever comes first.

“Do you remember when I invited you to psychoanalyze me?”

“I have Hyperthymesia. I never forget anything.”

“Then you’ll recall when you told me that I had only ever loved one person in all my life?”

Will does, but it doesn’t feel so much like a memory like it is an impression; another stolen mind that he had to build a fort over just to get through the day. He doesn’t usually dismantle them when they’ve gone up, but he’s willing to pull it back a little. Remember his tearful analysis of Hannibal; how overwhelming it had felt to read what he was willing to show.

“I do.”

“You were correct,” Hannibal says, washing a little lower on Will’s back now. “I had only ever loved one person. My little sister, Mischa.”

Will has never heard her name before and yet it cuts through the part of him that has been indented by the touch of Hannibal’s feelings. It burns like an old, jagged scar that’s healed over but never completely stopped hurting.

“I liked my parents well enough,” Hannibal continues, nudging Will so that he’ll turn and give him more space to work with. “They were kind enough to me. But my father was a count –“

“What?” Will doesn’t mean to interrupt, but it doesn’t feel like he has much of an option under the impact of *that* bomb. “Doesn’t that make you…?”

“Count Hannibal Lecter the eighth,” Hannibal says, apparently not bothered by the interruption. “Though that means very little these days. My family home served as an orphanage for a time and now sits empty with only the echoes of the past left to walk its halls.”

That is a lot to wrap his head around. “Right. Okay. I’m going to need time to process that. Go on with your story.”

“As I was saying, my father was a count and did not have much time to spend with me. My mother, a countess, had appearances to maintain. Charities, social circles, all manner of obligations. We were not close. I had my tutors, of course. My nanny, the cook, and the maids as well. But I was used to isolation. Often preferred it. I found the times when my parents would attempt to bridge the gap between us tedious, even as a young child. I was six when Mischa was born and indifferent to her at first.”

There’s almost as much warmth as there is resigned sadness in Hannibal’s voice and Will curls his fingers against his palms and keeps his eyes on the bubbles, so he can focus on listening to the story rather than accidentally experiencing it.

“She was quite ugly when she was born. Like a wrinkled, red squirrel. I did not tell my mother, but I thought it was a pity that Mischa had not inherited her beauty. I had no interest in her to begin with. She was a usurper by all rights; demanding what little attention I had been given and I often dreamed that the eagle that sometimes soured over our castle home would happen to steal her up from her bed and gently take her away to a happy, peasant home where the people were as ugly as she was so that she would fit right in.”

Will tries and fails not to laugh at the matter-of-fact tone that Hannibal uses to describe that childish fantasy; able to imagine that same tone of voice coming from a six-year-old version of him. Just as serious and frank about his feelings as the man sitting before him now.

“The eagle never did take her away and I found myself loving her in a way that I could not help. As an infant, she was another passing presence in my life; always being swept by in the arms of the nanny or of our mother. But as she got older and was able to begin to express wonder… to walk and become a little more lively, aware of the world around her and no longer entirely dependent on our mother or Nanny, I allowed her to follow me from place to place until she was as familiar as my shadow, and I could not walk without knowing she was there with me. Everyone else in my life until that time existed independently of me. We were planets orbiting the same stars, but seldom passing by close enough to make much contact. Mischa was the first person who was dependent on me and I was proud to be her caretaker.”

This is, all by accounts, a sweet story. Happy memories of an early childhood and the depth of a sibling bond… but Will can feel the charge in the air, the one that does not promise a happy ending.

“I am an only child now,” Hannibal says, delicately, confirming what Will already knew. “The sole survivor of a tragedy that claimed my family when I was eleven. I’ve had many years to heal and so I have. It does not pain me to think of Mischa anymore. She was a bright spot in my life for the little time we had together and what I know of love, I know because of her. To be needed and depended on for anything was a revelation that became the outline for who I am and how I know how to show care.”

“Life is full of first experiences, but everything that follows is just a comparison,” Will hums, recognizing that Hannibal has no interest in lingering on the more painful details of his explanation; that speaking about Mischa is not as easy as he’s pretending it is. “Makes sense. So… things like this?”

Will gestures to the bath. To the bubbles. To the loofa that Hannibal is still holding, scrubbing away the grime of a crime scene and turning the fragrant water pink with washed away blood.

“This does something for you?”

“You find it arousing when I care for you,” is not the answer that Will was expecting, and he feels his face growing hot with a blush that he wishes he could blame on the steam that’s still coming off the water. “You protest on principal because being seen as fragile or unstable has led people to infantilize you and strip you of your freedoms and it troubles you that you want to let me take care of you.”

“I thought we were talking about you.” Will says, weakly, unable to deny anything that Hannibal is saying, but also unwilling to tackle that topic just yet.

“You want to understand me. It will be easier if you understand yourself, first. Am I wrong?”

“You know that you’re not,” Will mutters, pulling away from Hannibal so he can try to sink into the water petulantly, like he can drown himself to get out of this conversation. Tit for tat was not what he bargained for… but if they have to be *fair* about things… “I hate people trying to do things for me. I hate people talking to me like I don’t know who I am and what I want or like I’m just some dumb kid with feelings too big for my body. People started to try to make choices for me before I could walk. Doctors already knew that something was wrong with me. That I was different from other kids. Not developing at the right pace. And it got harder when mama walked out on us, because my daddy loved me, but he was a single father and a high-school dropout who traveled a lot for work that didn’t pay much. And people wanted to take me away from him because they assumed he couldn’t do enough for me. I was always getting asked about him by school officials. By police officers. By child protective services. And they never took me away, but they kept trying to and it was terrifying for both of us. I hated that no one was listening to me when I said that I wanted to live with my father. I hated that no one would listen when I said that I was fine. They looked at me and they thought that I was too stupid or too helpless to know what was good for me.”

If Will clenches his fists any tighter, he thinks that he’s going to crack a bone, so he forces himself to loosen up.

“I told myself that I was never going to let anyone make me feel like that again if I could help it. I worked hard to be independent. To not rely on anyone. Not even my daddy if I could avoid it, because if I ever came to him with a problem he couldn’t solve, it seemed like they could just take me away. I learned how to take care of myself and I’m good at it. I’m not fragile, I’m not stupid. I don’t need help… but it feels nice when you do things for me. When you take care of me. I shouldn’t want it, but I do. It makes me feel weird, but it also makes me feel pretty hot inside, so I’m a little conflicted. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I know that I do.”

“If you’re one side of the coin, then I’m the other,” Hannibal slips off the ledge of the tub and kneels on the floor, wrapping his arms around Will’s wet chest and pulling him back against the side of the tub. Half-hugging and half-restraining. Will leans into it, closing his eyes when Hannibal’s lips graze the skin of his neck. “Just as you find it emotionally gratifying and

physically arousing to be taken care of, I get the same feelings from attending to your every need. I want to be the only person you turn to when you have any desire at all."

"…If we're sharing secrets, now, I guess you should know that I'd probably snap and kill ya dead if I found out that you were caring like this for anyone else." Will should have problems saying that while sitting in a tub of water that's been soiled by blood. "I want to be the only person you find worthy of that kind of attention."

"You are."

"But I shouldn't want it," Will says, even as a shiver of pleasure zips up his spine at the thought of being Hannibal's only. "Self-sufficiency is kind of a big deal even if you're not on the top of the list of people that the state wants put in an asylum."

"I want you to want it," Hannibal's mouth is at his neck again, his breath hot as he growls out the words. "I want you to not just depend on me, but to be dependent. I want to be the bedrock in your life; the foundation of all that you are. I want you to be helpless without me. To willingly give me control. And in return, I would give you devotion. Love. Obsession."

"That doesn't sound very healthy," Will's throat feels dry and his body feels weak. Every touch of Hannibal's mouth to his skin sends another bolt of heat straight to his groin. "For either of us."

"It's not." The words sound like a promise and Hannibal *licks* up the side of Will's neck. "Most people would advise you to run away from me. As far and as fast as you can."

"Probably." Will's head is spinning.

"Are you going to run?" It's a whisper in his ear, his mouth no longer making contact with any part of Will… but he's almost positive that Hannibal is smiling. "I won't stop you. I would let you go, Will. You could leave now. But if you choose to stay… I won't give you that option again. No one will take you away from me. Not even you."

"If I said yes now and tried to leave later… you'd chase me?"

"Yes." It's not just a growl. Not just a promise. It's a threat. Will licks his lips. "You'd never get far."

"And if someone tried to take me away from you?"

"It would be the last poor decision they ever make."

This is bad. This is so very, very bad. This is fire and gasoline; poison and wine. Any sane person would get up now, say thanks but no, and make a run for the nearest exit.

"Are you going to run, Will?" Hannibal asks again, still holding him tightly. "Do you want to leave?"

Will struggles in Hannibal's hold. Squirms until he loosens his grip and then turns his head so that he can look into Hannibal's eyes. He's not seeing all of him and he knows it. There's

something hidden in his gaze; something beyond all of this. Darker than even this talk of obsession and helplessness and mutual dependence.

“No,” Will whispers. “I’m not going to run.”

“I mean every word that I’ve said, Will.” It’s his last warning and Will knows it. “Be sure that you want this. I won’t let you go once you’ve promised to stay.”

“So, keep me then,” Will wraps his wet arms around Hannibal’s neck, uncaring about whether the oils in his bath are going to ruin his suit. “And kiss me.”

Hannibal does.

Chapter End Notes

These bitches gay. Good for them.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You can have my isolation; you can have the hate that it brings
You can have my absence of faith; you can have my everything

- Closer by Nine Inch Nails

Hannibal had promised Will a proper courtship – a slow and *delicate* wooing, gently severing all other earthly ties that bind him to the oppressive existence he leads now. Every kiss, every touch, every lingering glance… it was all meant to be the shears that snipped away the withering branches that kept Will from blooming into what he was always meant to be.

That courtship is exactly what he intends to give him as he reluctantly pulls away from the kiss that Will had asked for, loosening his grip and bracing himself for the disappointment that would spark in Will's eyes when Hannibal only finished bathing him, helped him rinse, and then put him to bed, well-cared for but *wanting*.

In his mind, he sees Will curled up in the complimentary robe provided by the hotel, beautiful but conflicted. Desperate for more than the goodnight kiss that Hannibal would offer but unwilling to overstep what he would perceive to be Hannibal's boundaries.

Reality, however, is a different beast entirely.

A beast in the shape of Will Graham with a furrowed brow and lips that droop downward with displeasure.

A beast that tightens its grip on Hannibal's shirt and uses it as leverage to *pull* with a surprising amount of strength. Hannibal simply can't react quickly enough; the sickening feeling of losing his balance is followed immediately by a tidal wave of bath water spilling out onto the floor as Hannibal falls into the bath, landing on top of Will and settling most of the way into the water. Suddenly *soaking*.

Will sputters with surprise at the splash of water that swells up to meet his face when Hannibal falls into the bath and scrambles to adjust to accommodate for Hannibal's bulk, splashing them both with another tide of soapy water.

When the water settles, Will stares at Hannibal with his mouth open in a perfect "O" of surprise.

"…Oops."

There is bathwater soaking through his clothes and no remorse in William's eyes; just amusement and surprise as though Hannibal had willingly chosen to dive into the tub beside him.

“Does Poseidon look so shocked when ships sink under the force of the waves?” Hannibal asks flatly as Will tentatively reaches forward to brush some suds from Hannibal’s cheek.

“Maybe if he only meant to keep the sailor who kisses him like *that* from getting away…” Will smiles sheepishly and then, like the devil made flesh he is, squirms underneath Hannibal, a siren song in motion. “I’d apologize, but I’m not sure I’m that sorry. I didn’t want you to stop.”

He *should* be irritated. But the flare of heat that rushes through him isn’t born of any kind of anger. Hannibal’s eyes narrow and his hands strike forward, but only to grasp onto Will and pull him close, dragging him across the meager space between them until he’s straddling Hannibal’s lap, the amusement in his blue eyes heating up into something else entirely.

Hannibal bows his head and brushes his lips down the curve of Will’s neck; tongue peeking out to taste the droplets of water that gleam against his pale skin.

“I would never advocate for saying something you don’t mean,” Hannibal traces his tongue back up Will’s neck and satisfaction curls in his gut at the way that Will shivers in response, his hands going to grip Hannibal’s sides even tighter than the shirt that’s clinging to his skin now. “Of course, that only means I’ll have to find a way to *make* you sorry.”

“Huh?”

Will doesn’t get a chance to let out more than one huff of confusion before Hannibal bites down on his throat, the hard edges of his teeth nipping at Will’s skin, much lighter than he’d like to but hard enough to make Will squirm and tense.

But it’s not until Hannibal can feel the vibrations of the soft, mewling noise that comes out as a choked gasp from Will’s mouth that he withdraws his teeth and reinforces the mark that he’s left with his lips and tongue instead, drawing Will’s skin against his lips with light suction and teasing with a circling tongue. Soothing the sting of pain and disrupting the flow of blood, sure to leave a light bruise against Will’s skin as a temporary mark; something to remind him, and anyone else who might have the opportunity to look, that he belongs to Hannibal. This firm, suckling kiss as close to a brand as Hannibal has available to him and every nip of his teeth to skin is another unspoken promise of ownership.

“Hannibal…” Will whimpers, his fingers still clutching for purchase at Hannibal’s ribcage, holding tight to him like he expects him to disappear in a puff of smoke or pop out of existence like the foam of bubbles on the water.

“Will?”

Hannibal purrs Will’s skin, sealing the mark that his mouth has left with a gentle touch of his lips and reaches down into the water, grasping and adjusting Will’s legs so that they’re wrapped around Hannibal, leaving no room for obstruction between Will’s exposed cock and Hannibal’s clothed groin. He presses forward in one languid roll of his hips and delights in how Will trembles in response, his eyes almost comically wide.

“Whatever is the matter?” Hannibal continues, his voice as even and unaffected as he can make it, even as he presses forward again; feels the length of Will’s cock against him for a moment that is all too brief before withdrawing to lighten the pressure. “I’m only doing what you wanted.”

Will’s hips jerk forward, seeking more than just the casual friction of every incidental touch of their bodies and Hannibal has to hold him tighter to keep him still.

“Hannibal!”

The protest in Will’s voice is *holy.*

“You wanted me to kiss you,” Hannibal reminds him, again brushing his lips against the blush of red skin that’s beginning to bruise against the crook of Will’s neck. Fondness to measure against casual cruelty. “Isn’t that what you asked for? *All* you asked for?”

“Hann-i-bal!” Will stresses the syllables of his name and worries his teeth over his bottom lip, squirming as if to entice Hannibal into action with the motion of his body alone. It disrupts the stillness of the water; a musical *plink, plink, plink* of droplets falling back into the bath left as an echo of his desperate cry.

And for the first time since he had laid eyes on him, Hannibal doesn’t curb the urge to grab a fistful of his hair and claim his mouth, his tongue sweeping through to try and get a taste of that desperation and *desire.* He kisses with intent to consume; to dig his teeth into everything that Will is and swallow him whole. To honour him in the visceral language of love that Hannibal learned so long ago.

He knows how to devour. How to take and take until there’s nothing left. What he doesn’t know is just how much that Will has to *give,* not until those hips roll into Hannibal’s once again and fingers tighten in his hair, holding him still.

But even with Will’s movement restricted, passion meets passion breath for breath and Hannibal is no longer certain who is surrendering to who, not until Will tries to tilt his head and better fit his mouth to Hannibal’s – and Hannibal lets go of Will’s hair to grasp at his chin, instead, fingers pressing into his skin tightly enough to hold him still, but not enough to bruise.

Keeping him in place and under control. He’ll be kissed as Hannibal wants him to be kissed, no more and no less than that. This delightful minx of a man had only agreed to surrender to him a few minutes ago and was already testing the boundaries of that commitment; a lesson was in order. A lesson that Hannibal is happy to teach with slick strokes of his tongue that move in teasing but intimate invasions, tasting and exploring Will’s mouth. And it’s not until he feels the lightheadedness of insufficient oxygen intake that he pulls back.

Will’s face is flushed as red as the mark on his neck and his breathing is deeply uneven, but his hands don’t relax their grip on him, not for a fraction of a second as he seems to summon the courage the speak the desire that was only able to coat the inside of his mouth moments ago.

“Will you touch me?”

A taunt sits on the tip of Hannibal’s tongue; a teasing reminder that he *is* touching Will already… that Will had only intended to keep Hannibal here to kiss him and hadn’t asked for more than that… but his hand betrays his thoughts, releasing his grip on Will’s chin to trace imagined patterns down the side of his neck and to his chest.

There’s so much of him to explore with these smooth, skimming touches of flesh to flesh. So much of Will that had been previously unknowable but now laid bare for him. His chest is smooth and almost completely hairless; genetics, Hannibal assumes, as Will doesn’t seem to be the type to put the thought or effort into removal; ribs that are easy to count for the slight build of him, the hardening skin of his nipples that stiffen at the very *whisper* of Hannibal’s touch skimming by.

And his stomach.

It’s the most intimate part of him for the prominent scar that stretches into a macabre smile; a mocking reminder that someone had gotten to him first; that an unworthy, ravenous mouth had intended to devour what was always meant for Hannibal.

He traces the outline of it and Will startles, suddenly clutching Hannibal’s wrist to stop him from moving. Hannibal looks up and their eyes meet. Shame burns in Will’s gaze, cutting through the haze of lust.

“Don’t…” Will’s voice is hoarse and hurting. “Not there.”

Matthew Brown will die a million deaths by Hannibal’s hands, in this life and every other that follows it, for creating a space on Will’s perfect body that cannot be touched by anyone else. It’s only the knowledge that there will be a time, somewhere in the future, that no part of Will’s body will be off-limits to him; that Hannibal will trace the mark with his tongue and there will be no thoughts of anyone but him, that keeps Hannibal from letting his anger show on his face.

He doesn’t address Will’s plea; doesn’t question or acquiesce, refusing to let Will duck behind a shield of insecurity. Instead, his hand simply dips lower and slips between Will’s thighs, feather light touches barely brushing over the length of his cock.

Will’s skin is hotter than the bath water and smoother than the oils that had been poured into it. The touch of him, velvet over steel, is entrancing and Hannibal teases the length of him twice more before the tiny sound of pained pleasure that rips through Will’s throat threatens to be his undoing.

Mercy is not in his name, but the compassion he has for Will is inconvenient to the best of his plans and Hannibal is simply unable to stop himself from wrapping his hand fully around Will’s cock, molding himself to the length of him and feeling fully the weight of him; the searing heat.

“Is this what you want?”

"*Yes*." The impatience in Will's tone is endearing, but not nearly as much as the way that his back arches, straining to try and slide the hard length of himself against Hannibal's palm to steal pleasure when it's not immediately gifted. "Yes! Please just…"

The flush in Will's face darkens as words seem to fail him beyond the cry of "please", but that was all Hannibal needed to hear. All he *wanted.*

Will's longing, Will's squirming, Will's *begging* as he holds fast to him, entirely consumed with a single-minded need that doesn't allow for reality beyond this moment. He's a *vision*, pale skin partly submerged in bloodied water. Pupils dilated and lips drooping at the corners when the gratification he seeks isn't instantaneous.

How is Hannibal meant to look at him and feel anything less than devotion?

The simple answer is that he isn't. And Hannibal kisses Will once more as he begins to stroke him. There's no great hurry in his movements. He has all the time in the world to let his fingers toy over the shape of him; to find where friction feels the sweetest for Will. What makes him squirm, what makes him writhe, and what turns those little whimpers of desire into shameless cries. Learning him as he was meant to be known, exploring until he found what would make Will toss his head back or claw his fingers against Hannibal's side and then promptly doing it again.

And again.

And again.

And once more, until Will has as much violence in his expression as he does desperate need. Face red, teeth barred, and hands *bruising* where they grip Hannibal.

His voice is more of a growl than anything else when he spits out the only word he seems to remember. "Hannibal!"

It's then that Hannibal stills his touch completely. He doesn't withdraw his hand, but he doesn't offer anything more than the pressure of his touch.

"Your articulation leaves much to be desired," It takes a concerted amount of effort to sound coolly unaffected, but he manages. "How can I give you what you don't ask for?"

Will practically snaps his teeth at him, half-mad with unsated desire. "You know what I want."

"Perhaps I do," Hannibal's agreement is shadowed by the way he lightly squeezes the base of Will's cock, watching as Will jerks his shoulders in response. "But I did say that I would find a way to make you sorry. Do you feel contrite now?"

The darkness of Will stands in much sharper relief than the light that he hides behind. His eyes flash with rebellious intent.

"No." He grinds out through gritted teeth, releasing his grip on Hannibal's sides to wrap his arms around his neck.

Will's gaze is searching, rather than hiding, and too late does Hannibal realize what he's looking for – his voice becomes syrupy sweet before Hannibal can hide any weaknesses that can be exploited.

"And you don't want me to either," Will's voice is a *purr*, now. Laced with intent. "you told me that you wanted to be the only one I turned to when I had any desire at all. Aren't you supposed to show me what it is I can get from you that no one else can give me?"

It's a direct and palpable hit. And Hannibal's heart beats furiously with pride. How could he feel anything else, when Will is just as willing to consume Hannibal to get what he wants as Hannibal is to devour him to attain what he needs?

"Hellion." Hannibal accuses, anyway.

Then he begins to stroke Will's cock in earnest. No more simple exploration: he re-finds and exploits every point of sensitivity that he had learned. His hand tightens and releases in the rhythm that Will's body knows as instinctively as the blinking of his eyes, stroking Will faster and faster until his legs shake and his body rolls to meet every point of perfect contact.

Those shameless cries return but this time they don't become muffled whimpers through lips that are pressed so tightly together that they may never come apart. No, this time Will lunges forward and stifles himself by sinking his teeth into the skin of Hannibal's collarbone. Pain sears through him pleasantly and Hannibal's own cock jerks violently in response to it, but the pace of his hand doesn't slow.

Will's teeth grind into him, claiming just as much as he's being claimed. And Hannibal can feel it when he draws blood from him; a rivulet of red that trickles down his chest, to his abdomen, to the already rose-tinted water they're sitting in.

The violence of it is heady; Will's body grows tauter and tauter in Hannibal's lap. Both sweetly undone and violently taken. Bloodied and bashful with the way that his face is flushed pink while his lips are tinted crimson when he releases his teeth's hold on Hannibal's flesh and tilts his head back, friction burning too sweetly for him to do anything but accept its dominance over his body.

And it's the sight of the blood darkening Will's lips as he loses himself in his pleasure; gives himself over to the tide of with a trembling, breathless cry and spills himself into Hannibal's grasp, that sends *him* tumbling over the edge of the precipice that he hadn't noticed he'd been standing on. And Hannibal cums, untouched, just moments after Will.

Aftershocks are accompanied by surprise as he releases Will only so that he can catch him when his body grows lax and he sinks into Hannibal, breathing heavily and shuddering with his own lingering sparks of pleasure. Will tucks his head under Hannibal's jaw and curls into him and Hannibal strokes his hair instinctively, even as he contemplates his body's response.

Embarrassment is a foreign feeling to Hannibal, and it stays distant from him now. There is only curiosity; a silent wonder of when and how Will got so deeply under his skin, to the point that he could be so moving to Hannibal, in a way that no one else ever has.

That silent question is banished the moment that Will shifts to look up at him, hazy pleasure still dark in his blue eyes. The answer is all too clear, written in his very existence.

Will was simply meant for him.

“Hannibal?” Will’s voice is thick with exhaustion, but endearingly sweet as he blinks at him, the fall back down the heights of pleasure a long and confusing one. “You’re bleeding.”

“I am,” Hannibal agrees.

He can feel the bloods still trickling, even if he can’t get a good look at the mark that’s been left behind. It’ll be a pleasant thrill, later, to look into the mirror and see the sharp impressions of Will’s teeth imbedded in his skin.

A blink and horror dawns in Will’s expression; the light of morality finding its way through a crack in his mind and banishing that beautiful, violent creature back to the depths of Will’s mind as he jerks back away from Hannibal and pales considerably.

“Holy shit, I bit you???”

(***)

There is no apology that Will can make that seems sincere or meaningful enough to assuage the damage that he’s done. And, for once, he means that in a literal sense.

A very bloody literal sense.

“At least let me help you disinfect it,” Will bounces nervously on the balls of his feet, watching Hannibal’s expression for any sign that he’s not nearly as understanding about this as he’s pretending to be. “I read somewhere that human bites are twice as likely to get infected as a bite from an animal.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in only the white, fluffy robe that Hannibal had ushered him into after drying him off, Will can’t help but feel a little *useless* as Hannibal stands before him, the towel wrapped around his hips doing fuck all to distract from the livid *bite* mark on his chest.

“Mylimasis, I’m fine,” Hannibal says again, with a lot more patience than Will figures he ought to have at a time like this. “It’s not terribly deep. I’ll keep the wound –“

Will flinches at the word.

“ – clean and that should be enough.” Hannibal continues, his tone still infuriatingly unaffected. Will wishes he would be angry or at least bothered. “It doesn’t need stitching.”

Will almost relaxes… until Hannibal goes on.

“Though it may scar.”

Will throws himself back onto the bed, landing hard enough to knock an “oof” out of his throat and covers his face with both hands. What the hell is wrong with him? He’s never lost control like that before; never sank somewhere so deeply inside of himself that he started to act, well… violent.

He’s had other lovers in his life. Flings, fleeting romances. He can’t remember having ever bitten one of them before. Not even intentionally, and especially not violently enough to make them bleed.

Is there something wrong with me? He wonders, pressing his fingers so hard against his eyes that he seeks sparks of light. *First, I unload ten rounds in a suspect, then I take a chunk out of my boyfriend. Was Alana right to worry? Am I losing my fucking mind?*

Will doesn’t realize that Hannibal’s closed the space between them until he feels hands gently prying his own away from his face. Hannibal looms over him, a gentle expression of patience on his face.

“You are thinking very loudly,” He tells Will, lifting one of his hands so that he can kiss the palm of it. “Do you not believe me when I tell you that I’m fine?”

“You might be downplaying it,” Will mutters, barely resisting the urge to pull his hand back away from Hannibal, to curl up into himself and keep self-flagellating the way he knows he deserves. If he wasn’t so Jewish, he’d make a good Catholic. “…Alana accused me of using excessive force to take down Hobbs. I - I shot him ten times, Hannibal. I’m not like that. She thinks that there’s something wrong with me and maybe she’s right, because we came back here, and I hurt you.”

Hannibal’s expression does grow a little chilly, then, but the ire in his voice doesn’t belong to Will. “Alana would do well to respect the boundaries that you have repeated to her since the moment of your release.”

Then, in a much softer tone. “Will, you have endured so much in a very small amount of time. Five months spent isolated from friends and tormented by those who remained to surround you. It is unreasonable for anyone, including yourself, to expect you to be exactly who you were the moment before the betrayal. We aren’t creatures that remain stagnant; we evolve to survive our surroundings. We become more than what we were in order to overcome that which thwarts our progress.”

“A little stagnation doesn’t sound like a bad thing right now,” Will murmurs, slightly cowed by the look in Hannibal’s eyes, but not enough to give up on the self-loathing. He’s getting too good at it to quit now. “I don’t know what I’ve become, but I’m not sure I like it.”

“Change is difficult, but I wouldn’t say you’ve completed your evolution yet,” Hannibal kisses Will’s other palm. “You are in the process of becoming. When you shed the skin that you’ve outgrown and free yourself from the shackles that have been imposed on you, I promise you’ll be much happier.”

Will can't help it. He laughs at the utter sincerity in Hannibal's tone; his ability to say completely ridiculous things without batting an eye never ceases to amaze. "You sound like the expert on this. It'd be nice if you could spare me the suspense and tell me what, exactly, I'm becoming."

He wasn't expecting a real, honest answer. But Hannibal gives him one anyway.

"Something beautiful," he responds, leaning down to kiss Will's forehead now.

There's reverence that Will doesn't totally understand in that gesture; a silent promise spoken in a language that he's only partially able to speak. It's confusing. But then again, everything is now that he's not being distracted by sex.

"I wish I could be as sure about that as you seem to be."

"I am certain enough for the both of us," Hannibal smiles pleasantly, but he's using that tone again. The one that discourages any further argument.

Will almost keeps it up just to spite him, but Hannibal's phone chimes and saves him from self-destructive tendencies.

"Ah," Hannibal steps away from Will and grabs his phone, looking down at it briefly before nodding. "Agent Katz has dropped our bags off at the front desk; someone will be bringing them up momentarily. She sends her regrets about not being able to check in. There is, evidentially, much more work to be done."

"Cases never seem to end, even after the bad guy has been caught." Or killed, Will adds mentally. But he can't say it out loud yet. "Sucks that she has to work late, but I am glad about pants."

"Perhaps I should ask the front desk to keep the bags, then." Hannibal muses, an almost wicked smile curling his lips. "I like the way you wear what you have on."

Butter wouldn't melt in this man's mouth. Will rolls his eyes, trying to force his body not to respond with a blush of pleasure. It doesn't work.

"Whatever," is his genius reply to that.

"I will call down to the front desk to make sure they do not misplace our things," Hannibal grabs something off the nightstand and hands it to Will. "In the meantime, I'd like you to think about what you would like for dinner…"

A brief look of pain crosses Hannibal's face and for a second, Will panics and immediately looks to the bite he left on him, trying to see some sign of it hurting.

But then Hannibal continues, his lips twisted in a disgruntled frown. "And, if you would, try to stick to vegetarian options. I don't know how they source their meat or how the animals are prepared, and I would prefer not to take chances on poor quality."

Will relaxes back against the bed, trying not to laugh now that he realizes it's vegetarians that Hannibal has a problem with; not the wound that Will left on him.

"I'll see what I can manage," Will agrees, his stomach roiling rebelliously against the idea of eating *anything*, but he's pretty sure Hannibal won't let that slide as generously as he is the idea of eating something he didn't make himself. "Now, go make your call so you can come back and help me figure out what the hell these dishes actually are. What is a reduction?"

"…I can fix you," Hannibal says, not for the first time about Will's palate. "Give me time. I will fix you."

Will flips him off.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been haunting me for three days. It wasn't even supposed to exist. I had no intention of including any explicit smut scenes, just because they weren't in my outline. Will Graham manifested in my home and held me at gunpoint until I finished this, though. So, here ya go.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

S/O to Elaine-Spades, without whom, this chapter would have taken a lot longer to figure out. Our conversations keep me from losing my mind and the plot. Truly a bestie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blind spot, take your best shot
Lucky me
Go fly a kite until you're tangled in the hanging tree

- Leave Me Alone by I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT THEY FOUND ME

Will knows the cold of his cell by the familiar ache in his joints and the *crackle* of his spine when it snaps back into alignment as he sits up and blearily peers into the darkness, the stain of sleep in his eyes smearing the abstract shapes that his mind tries to paint when there's nothing to see. Not the shape of the rusted sink, not the toilet in the corner, and not the empty shelf where his books would be if Chilton wasn't such a fucking dictator.

Everything is gone. Swallowed whole by the *void* that's settled in here with him. And when he closes his eyes, he can imagine the darkness as an amorphous blob with a gaping maw and gluttonous stomach, grasping at everything with hands that aren't really hands but thin wisps of smoke that wrap around each object like a rope and draw it into the creature's mouth. Swallowing it whole, without teeth or tongue.

He doesn't like to imagine that. So, he keeps his fucking eyes open as he forces himself to stand and throws his hands out in front of him to find the bars of his cell with his fingers instead of his face, wondering who's on guard duty tonight and if they were still standing there or if they took off when the power went out.

Because the power *did* go out. That's all this is. There are no monsters lurking in the dark, no seizing hands reaching out from the shadows to grab him, and the breathing he hears is his own. It doesn't belong to the void because that's insane and impossible and he's just worked up. The only terror here is the fact that he's in the BSHCI to begin with. Everything else is just… bad luck.

Will's hands finally find the bars of his cell and he clings to them, holding on tightly as he guides himself to what he thinks must be the center of the room.

He can't see the bars that he's touching or anything on the outside of them, but at least they're there.

“Hello?” His throat burns with the strain of speaking, his mouth gritty like he had a tray of sand for dinner, and he turns his head to cough into the crook of his arm. “Matthew?”

No answer.

Not a great sign. If he was the one on duty, he would probably already be pushing himself up against the bars; reaching through the gaps between them to try and soothe Will and promise him that everything was fine. And as revolting as that thought is, at least it would mean that someone was still there. That’s he’s not completely alone, here.

Will lets his hands fall away from the bars and rests his forehead against them, instead. It’s just a power outage. It’s just a power outage. It’s just…

Not cold?

The air is still frigid, biting into his exposed skin with icicles in place of fangs, but the bars that he’s touching are strangely… warm. And softer than he thinks they should be. He jerks his head back and reaches out again, brushing his index finger down the length of the first one he encounters, as far down as his arm will reach, and then back up again.

Velvet.

The bars feel like velvet.

Will jerks back in surprise and stumbles over his own too feet. There’s less space to flail in than there should be and something hard and jagged presses into his back. He tenses away from that and whirls around in time to see antlers push forward from the darkness. Reaching out to him like grasping fingers that have been ripped clean of any muscle or skin.

Another pair joins the first.

And then another.

And then another.

There’s nowhere that Will can turn his head, no place that he can *look* where there aren’t antlers protruding from. His cell has become a cage of bones, forcing him to stand straight in one tiny square of space to avoid being impaled.

“Dr. Graham?” Matthew’s whisper soft voice calls to Will from the other side of skeletal cocoon that holds him. “You okay?”

No. No, he’s pretty fucking far from okay. But the tip of the antler that’s pressing into his throat is keeping him from saying so.

“I’m sorry.” Matthew’s apology is painfully sincere. “I know this must be terrifying for you. Just breathe. It’ll be over soon. And you and I will finally be together. I’ll always have a part of you inside of me.”

The tip of the antler presses more firmly into his skin. Blood pools and then trickles down his neck like a warm, wet tongue. Will shudders and chokes, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I love you.” Matthew says.

And the antlers rip through him.

*

*

*

“Graham!”

Will’s eyes flutter open again, finding searing light in place of where darkness had been just a few seconds ago. One of his hands are at his throat and the other is squeezing the side of the Shrike’s workbench so hard that it’s a wonder that he doesn’t have a fistful of sawdust by now.

It’s just lucky that he’s got gloves on, or Beverly would kill him for leaving fingerprints on an area she hadn’t dusted yet. He lets go of the bench and turns to meet Jack’s gaze, finding the agent staring hard at him.

“What?”

“I said, what do you see?” Jack folds his arms over his chest and glares. Posturing for the sake of the agents that don’t belong to his team. “Anything useful?”

Will closes his eyes, but this time only sees the inside of his eyelids, and exhales sharply. He knows that this attitude isn’t reserved solely for him – the final word on jurisdiction had been given and it looked like the sandbox was going to have to be shared for the rest of the investigation into Hobbs. Jack barely played well with the members of his team that he hand-selected. Having people like Agent Sean Bennet breathing down the back of his neck hadn’t done wonders for his temper.

But that doesn’t mean Will has to like it either.

“I see a new permanent installation in your Evil Minds Museum.” Will mutters, opening his eyes again and trailing his gaze over the bags upon bags of antlers that are set to be transported as evidence.

A literal cage of bones, just not one as frightening as he saw in his mind.

“What we learn from Garret Jacob Hobbs will help us catch the next Garret Jacob Hobbs.” Jack dismisses the jab and steps closer to Will, his voice growing urgent. “There are still seven bodies unaccounted for.”

‘Find them’ is what Jack means to say and Will shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and tries not to give into the urge to kick at one of the bags of antlers, a scathing retort about

this not being a “Where’s Wally” sitting in the back of his throat, curbed only by his desire to wrap this thing up as fast and as neatly as he can, so that Jack never has a reason to call on him again.

“He was eating them,” Will says, tonelessly, because no tone he has available to him would be anything but trouble. “You’d have better luck checking the sewer system than here for any parts of them.”

“There had to be some parts he didn’t eat.”

It’s not Jack that speaks this time, but Agent Bennet. It doesn’t rankle Will any less to hear from him, though. He’s still irritated by the barrage of interviews he was given yesterday and since Bennet was the last face he’d seen regarding them, he got to keep all the credit for pissing him off.

“Not necessarily,” Will sucks in a breath through his teeth, hating the words even as they come to him. “Waste not, want not.”

The twist of Bennet’s lips betrays how disturbing he finds the notion and Will could almost laugh if there was anything remotely funny about the situation.

“Will has a point.”

All three men jump in surprise as Hannibal suddenly speaks up, somehow having managed to step inside of the shack with Alana in tow without creaking the door or making any other sound to announce their presence before speaking. And Will, who’s halfway used to the way that Hannibal just appears places, recovers first and immediately makes a beeline for him.

“Anything else of note on property?” Will asks, but even to his own ears it sounds more like, “can we leave?”.

“Nothing,” Alana answers before Hannibal can. “This is the only building within miles. Everything else is just wilderness.”

“A perfect place to bring a victim,” Jack rubs at his face with both hands. “Alright, at least we know the extent of what we’re working with. Agent Bennet, would you mind assembling a team to begin digging up the property? If there are any bodies on site, here, I want them found.”

“There won’t be.”

“Whether you believe that or not, I want all the bases covered.” Jack’s glare threatens to grind Will’s bones into dust, so he lifts both of his hands in a gesture of surrender. “We have seven grieving families who need closure, and we will do all that we can to give it to them.”

“I’m on it.”

Bennet gives Jack two thumbs up before making a beeline for the door, clearly as interested as getting the hell away from Jack as Will is… or, maybe, just wanting to be wherever Will isn’t. It’s hard to tell.

“There are many cultures of people who use every part of what they hunt,” Hannibal hums, defending Will without addressing Jack. “Perhaps Garrett Jacob Hobbs was not dissimilar to them in that regard.”

“Or maybe he wasn’t eating alone.”

Will’s spine is going to snap in half one of these days by the way that he stiffens every time Jack opens his mouth.

“It’s not hard to assume that he was feeding the girls to his family, too.” Alana looks a little green when she says it, but her voice is surprisingly steady. “Especially if he was using his hunting trips as an excuse to be away.”

“If his wife was unaware of his proclivities, it would be strange for him to return from so many trips without any meat,” Hannibal agrees, surveying the shack. “Especially when he’s clearly demonstrated prowess as a hunter before.”

“Maybe he wasn’t hunting alone, either.” Jack says more forcefully, bringing the attention back to him. “It’s a lot of work. Disappearing these girls, butchering them and then worse. All without leaving a shred of anything outside of this room.”

Will’s hands curl into fists in his pockets. “It’s an isolated area. The trees provide cover and no one’s around to hear anyone scream. He’d just have to get the girls here before they woke up again. He wouldn’t need help if he didn’t have to hide.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Will doesn’t buy Jack’s shoulder shrug for one minute. “But a grown man abducting college kids should have attracted attention somewhere if he was just coming up behind them in pubic. Unless they trusted him enough to follow him to a secluded area. Or trusted someone who worked with him.”

“Abigail Hobbs is a suspect?” Hannibal asks, sounding surprised.

“We've been conducting house-to-house interviews around the Hobbs residence and this property.” Jack gestures vaguely with one hand but doesn’t take his eyes off Will. “Learned a few things.”

“Such as?”

“Hobbs and his daughter spent a lot of time together. They spent a lot of time together *here*. She would be the ideal bait, wouldn't she?”

“He cut her throat, Jack.” The words feel like a knife – or the tip of antler – against *his* neck as he says them. “I watched it happen. The blood on the kitchen floor hasn’t even dried all the way yet and you want to accuse her of being an accessory to murder?”

“I want to know what happened to these girls, Will. Ten bullets to the chest stopped Garret Jacob Hobbs from telling me. If Abigail Hobbs knows what happened to those victims, then I want to get it out of her.”

Will opens his mouth to retort, furious, but Alana beats him to it.

“Jack, Abigail *is* one of the victims. You didn’t catch Hobbs, Will did. Maybe you hate that but deciding that Abigail has to pay for what her father did is not the way to find justice for anyone.”

For the first time in a while, Will is *glad* to see that Alana glare. At least while it’s fixed on Jack, anyway.

“Dr. Bloom, as you have made a formal request to sit in as Abigail’s therapist, perhaps it is not appropriate for you to be in on this investigation,” Jack retorts, but Alana refuses to be cowed.

“Agent Crawford, as you are once again relying on hearsay to decide whether or not someone is guilty of a crime, perhaps it is not appropriate for *you* to be in on this investigation,” Alana spits right back at him, her gaze flicking to Will briefly.

“Dr. Bloom, I want you to wait outside.”

“You can send everyone out of this room and talk to yourself about your theories. That doesn’t make you right!”

“Alana, I’m warning you. You will leave on your own or I will have you escorted from the grounds in handcuffs.”

“Do you even hear yourself? And you wonder why they think you’re not fit to lead the BAU anymore? You are out of control. Abigail Hobbs doesn’t deserve to be treated like a criminal anymore than Elise Nichols does.”

“Elise Nichols didn’t help her father lure girls to their death.”

“You don’t know that Abigail did either! You are just so-”

“Shut up. Both of you.” Will pinches the bridge of his nose before he stalks forward, feet following the path of his gaze to the shimmering spark of colour that caught his eye. “You’ve got bigger problems than trying to find a scapegoat to use in a public trial.”

Jack has turned an unpleasant shade of purple in the face of being told to shut up, so Hannibal is the one who asks.

“What do you mean, Will?”

“I mean…” Will pulls a pair of tweezers out of his chest pocket and uses them to pluck a long, red hair from one of the evidence bags. “Someone should check Tattlecrime, because Freddie Lounds has been busy.”

(***)

They say that even a broken clock is right twice a day, but Hannibal has his suspicions that it's not pure, dumb luck that Jack Crawford has managed to see past the wall of antlers and discern where Abigail's place in the horror really was – at her father's side.

It's a brief but poignant moment. A look beyond what he has become to what he used to be. A clever man, well-suited for his job. The criminally insane illude him; Agent Crawford simply doesn't have the imagination it takes to understand them or why they do what they do. But the average person, driven to kill out of desperation? For them, Jack is a bloodhound.

And his teeth are ready to dig into Abigail Hobbs.

"She just had her world turned upside down. And now, when she wakes up from surgery, all she's going to see is that it's still spinning." Will growls out, the restless energy in him adding a decadent scent to the mist of nature that surrounds them.

Surprisingly, it is Alana that Will has turned to now. He doesn't meet her gaze, but he shares in her anger and frustration, opening a door back into his life that Dr. Bloom is eager to step through, her voice thick with commiseration and concern.

"I'm sure there's something I can do," she says, her voice sugar sweet with promise. "I haven't been approved as her therapist yet, but I'm pretty sure I will be. Once I am, I can take steps to keep her from him."

"Not for long. Not if he can convince his bosses that she's a suspect worth looking into. They'll take her into custody and the only one who can help her at that point is a lawyer – one they'll appoint to her, because she's seventeen, has no parents, and no money to afford her own." Will's expression grows pinched with pain. "Trust me. It won't go well for her. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt. If Jack decides she's guilty, then he's just going to ruin the wreck that her life already is. Because he can. You might be able to write a letter vouching for her, but any case that goes to trial is going to end with her at the BSHCI. Cannibalism is a real hot button issue, apparently."

"Will, I know you don't want to talk about it. But I – I need you to tell me how I could have helped you," Alana stammers over the words, lips trembling with a combination of sadness and fury, but manages to get them out just the same. "I don't want her to go through what you did. I can't undo what I helped happen to you, but maybe I can save her."

And that is where Hannibal feels a line needs to be drawn. Wordlessly, he undoes his tie and neatly folds it before placing it delicately into the pocket of his coat… which he then also removes, quickly unbuttoning and shrugging out of.

Will looks up when Hannibal drapes the coat over his shoulders, surprised.

"You're shaking," Hannibal says, smoothly. It's not a lie; Will's fingers do tremble. And he takes one of his hands into both of his own to warm him. "This is an important conversation, but perhaps best held at a later time and somewhere else."

"Hannibal," Alana interjects immediately, her covetous fingers practically squeezing around the only chance she's had, so far, to regain her place in Will's good graces. "I appreciate that

you're worried about Will, but there might not be time to talk about this later. If we're going to help Abigail, then we need a plan faster than Jack can make one."

"She's right," Will says, but his gaze betrays a reluctance to stay now that Hannibal has reminded him of their close proximity. "I can't… if there's something we can do to help Abigail…"

"In my experience in working with patients who are under scrutiny from law enforcement, there is very little you can do within the confines of their procedure," Hannibal brings Will's hand up to his lips, kissing the cool skin of his palm. "Jack Crawford will do as he pleases and neither you or Dr. Bloom, as his colleagues, can do much to hinder him."

Will's face begins to fall as the truth of Hannibal's words sink in, revealing terror and clawing desperation. Her life is his life; a parallel of where he's been. Her helplessness is his helplessness; if he can't save Abigail's life, then he can't save his own. And Hannibal is certain that there is nothing else in life that he will find to be as sweet as the feeling of opening Will Graham's wounds simply so that he can patch him up again.

"However," Hannibal continues, offering hope in the same breath that it took to strip it away. "Once you and I are off this property, your last case with Jack Crawford is completed. Neither of us will be working with him again. And it is no conflict of interest for me to ensure that Abigail has proper legal representation. My lawyer is on retainer. One phone call, and Abigail will have all the same legal protection that I have."

If there were any moment that Hannibal would want to hold onto for all the rest of his life, even at the cost of every other memory he holds dear within his mind palace, it would be this – the way that Will looks at him as he holds out a lifeline. Once again saving him from drowning.

"You would do that?" Will's voice swells with hope.

"Of course," Hannibal smiles, gaze shifting from Will to Alana. His smile doesn't waver, but neither does the silent warning that he issues in the way that he crowds Will against his body. "The truth is that I would, whether it is what you wanted or not. Abigail Hobbs is our responsibility now."

"I don't know if that's…" Alana starts to say, licking her lips uncertainly, but Hannibal refuses to be questioned. Not in front of Will.

"Our actions saved Abigail Hobbs' life, but they also orphaned her. Such an event comes with certain emotional obligations and responsibilities. The three of us have shared an experience that will bond us for life."

Hannibal adjusts his posture, allowing the rather loose undershirt that he pulled on this morning to be pulled down just enough to show the bruising bite mark that Will had left against his skin. He knows when Alana sees it, because her eyes grow wide as her cheeks grow pink. Even if she can't appreciate the possessiveness in Hannibal's stance or the silent warning in his gaze… this is a clear sign.

The maximum capacity of their family has been reached. He's given Will a lover and now a child. There's nothing left that Alana can touch or give. No day of his that she can save before Hannibal is there.

"And if there is anyone who should stand up to defend Abigail's life once again, then why not us?" Hannibal finishes, his smile kept perfectly in place.

"I don't know if it's a good idea for the two of you to get so involved with her." Alana says, but there's a resignation in her tone. Defeat recognized by some part of her mind, even if the rest of her isn't sure yet. "But I guess I can't really stop you."

No. Hannibal thinks, smugly. *You cannot.*

Chapter End Notes

Quick note: I am going to be visiting family from the 25th - 5th of Nov and I honestly have no idea how often I'll be able to write. There's a chance that this miniature vacation will give me more time to write.... and a chance that I won't update again until I'm back home, and I'm not sure which is more plausible at the moment.

HOWEVER, I will have time for Discord! And, as it happens, there's a brand new Hannigram server to get excited about! Come join Elaine-Spades and I over at "Homoerotic Cannibalism (NOT CLICKBAIT)" to discuss fanfic ideas, fic recs, or just to talk about how pretty Hugh Dancy is, as God intended.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m not usually prone to begging,” Freddie Lounds snarls out, squirming against the knee that’s planted firmly in the small of her back, keeping her face down on her motel bed. “But I’ll ask nicely for you to get the fuck off of me.”

She feels like a child, and an unruly one at that, when the cuffs that are slapped around her wrists *click* and she’s suddenly lifted up off the bed like she weighs nothing, her back pressed against the chest of the female agent who had tackled her in the seconds after the door to her motel was kicked down, and left to face Jack Crawford like he’s the Principal come to tell her that she’s earned herself another week’s in-school-suspension.

(A slap on the wrist and nothing she’d never heard before.)

“Agent Crawford,” she greets him, spitting out a mouthful of her own hair. “Nice to see you again.”

“Wish I could say the same.”

“You do look tired,” she sneers at him with just enough humour in her expression to make it pass for a smile. “I’d offer you a seat, but I don’t really think you’ll be staying long.”

He doesn’t dignify that with a comment of his own. Instead, he snaps his fingers and Freddie finds herself being dropped back down onto the bed. Sitting on the edge, this time, with her wrists bound behind her. She bounces once before settling and tosses her head to get her hair out of her eyes, watching through narrowed lids as the surrounding agents begin to file out.

“Watch the door.” Jack commands.

And then they’re alone.

Freddie refuses to be intimidated, though. “I appreciate the pageantry, but I know my rights and I also know that I’ve done nothing that you can arrest me for. Freedom of the Press exists for a reason. You can’t punish me for writing an article.”

“Maybe not,” Jack agrees, still unnervingly calm. He’s speaking quieter than she’s ever heard him before, forcing her to lean forward and strain to make sure that she doesn’t miss anything… particularly anything she can pass onto her lawyer, when she sues his ass for this. “But I’m not here because of an article, Lounds.”

“Well, if you’re looking for an autograph, I’ll need a pen.”

“The Shrike’s nest,” Jack continues, as if he hadn’t heard her speaking. “Clever name. You think the Times is going to borrow that from you?”

“I think my lawyer is going to fillet your ass if you don’t get me out of these cuffs. Agent.”

“I think even your lawyer will know a lost cause when they see one. You practically signed your own death certificate with those photos you posted. Freedom of the press doesn’t mean you can enter a federal crime scene without permission.”

Freddie doesn’t have space enough to flinch away when Jack suddenly reaches for her with a pair of tweezers drawn from his pocket, grasping a strand of her hair and pulling it free from her scalp with a slight burning sensation.

“Especially if you’re going to be careless. You took those photos, but you also left something behind. Something that contaminated my crime scene. You know what that means?”

The sinking feeling in Freddie’s stomach answers for her, even as she smiles sweetly. “I bet you’ll tell me.”

“It means you obstructed justice. That’s a felony and one punishable by five years in prison. You’re a writer, Lounds. You tell me… what do you think happens when I throw you in a pit with all the poor souls whose stories you exploited for your own gain, hm? Spin me a yarn about that.”

“Agent Crawford…” Freddie tilts his head at that delicate angle that makes her look sweeter than sugar – a Lounds trait that she got from her mother, and her mother before that – and lightens her tone. “You and I are basically old friends. I give your crime scenes publicity and merit that they would never have without me. The public wouldn’t even know your name if I hadn’t written it down. So, I’m sure that we can figure this out. For old times sake?”

“I didn’t come here to do you any favours, Lounds.” Jack growls out and beads of sweat dot her hairline; she can feel the needle-sharp prickles of anxiety on the back of her neck when everything in her tells her to look for a way out. “But I’ll tell you what.”

Oh, thank God.

“You do me a favour, and I’ll see how I feel about sending you to prison after.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising.” Freddie licks her lips, looking around the room. No cameras, no witnesses. Nothing she can use. “I want a better guarantee than how you’ll feel after, if I’m going to do something for you.

“No deals, Lounds. Nothing you can worm your way out of. You want your freedom? Then you better listen very carefully. Like your life depends on it.”

There’s very little that Freddie wouldn’t give in this moment to slap Jack Crawford across his smug face. Or write a particularly acerbic article about his leadership style; something that’d get every Joe Nobody on the streets to call for his head on a pike.

But she’s the one in handcuffs. So, she’s the one who forces another smile.

“Consider me a captive audience.” She says, emphasizing the word “captive” as a hiss through her gritted teeth. “What do you want me to do?”

“Right now, I just want you to listen.” Jack grabs Freddie’s computer chair from the desk and pulls it closer to the bed so that he can sit in front of her, their gazes’ level with each other’s. “It’s about Will Graham and the next story that you’ll be writing.”

(***)

In the dismal grey of another rainy afternoon, *Joanne’s* was quiet; hosting no one but the most loyal of patrons who crowded the bar in order to watch some game on the grainy television set and the four of them – Alana, Beverly, Jimmy, and Brian, who had been dismissed as out-of-towners and shoved into a corner booth as far away from the “action” as possible, out of sight and mind of most of the staff; save for one cheerful waitress who had dropped off their complimentary water glasses and promised to be back in a minute with their orders.

But staring down at the faded placemat in front of her, Alana is thinking about anything but eating.

“Anybody else kind of surprised that Jack okay’d us going to eat?” Brian asks, finally shattering the silence when no one else does. “I kinda thought he was going to tell us to learn how to photosynthesize.”

“He did tell me to tilt my head back and open my mouth when I told him I needed a break to get something to drink,” Jimmy interjects, setting his menu aside. “Rainwater isn’t the easy target that you think it’s going to be, either.”

Someone laughs at that, either Beverly or Brian. Alana isn’t sure, still staring down hard at her menu as she weighs her options. There’s an opening there, if she’s willing to take it. She could join in with laughter, make another joke about Jack’s unreasonable expectations of them, or ask what the rain tastes like when it’s fresh from the cloud. Something clever or funny to ease herself into the conversation. Or she could cut straight to the point, tell them all why she invited them here in the first place. Fling open the door to that grey area she’s found herself peering into and get her hands a little dirty for once.

(Or go to the bathroom, pretend to be sick, come back out and bail on this whole idea. Do it all by the book and prove to everyone, including herself, that corners don’t have to be cut to get to the right places no matter what history is determined to show her.)

“So, who’s going to tell Jack that he’s losing his mind? Is this a “nose goes” situation or does it call for something more serious? Eeny-meeny-miny-moe is a classic for a reason.”

Alana’s jaw about hits the table and her head snaps upright as Brian not only cuts to the chase that she’s been tracing in her mind but does it *while* he lifts a straw up to his lips and *blows* to send the wrapper across the table, punctuating the immaturity of his statement with a paper projectile that bounces off Jimmy’s cheek.

Beverly reacts before she can, reaching across the table and flicks Brian in the face. “Knock it off, Z. We didn’t bring you here to look stupid.”

“Um…why did you bring us here?” Jimmy asks, apparently willing to forgive the shot that Brian fired if it meant avoiding Beverly’s wrath. “Not that I don’t love the ambience…”

He *delicately* wipes the tip of his finger against the greasy tabletop, glancing around at the locals as if afraid they’ll suddenly become rabid.

“It had four stars on yelp.” Alana’s defense of the diner sounds weak to her own ears, but maybe that’s because she also knows that it only had two reviews and one of them was written by an employee. “And… it’s out of the way of both the cabin and the motels. It seemed like neutral ground; a good place to talk.”

“Don’t knock Alana’s choice,” Beverly chimes in. “Unless you guys were thinking up better ones?”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I was…”

“So, so busy with that one thing.”

“Yeah, just…swamped.”

“Exactly,” Beverly wags her index finger at the three of them to halt the flow of excuses. “So, no one gets to complain about asynchronous light flickers, faded menus, or the fact that the guy over there just spit a wad of chewing tabaco straight onto the floor.”

“I get to complain about that,” a waitress mutters as she passes by the table.

“…She gets to complain about that,” Beverly amends, smiling brightly until she’s out of earshot, then looking at Alana. “You wanted to talk. Now’s the time, before Jack shows up with a new task that we just *have* to take care of.”

Right. Look’s like she’s a lot more transparent than she thought she was; the choice is being made for her. Nothing to do for it but… do it. “Okay. I… I think we all know that Jack has gotten progressively more and more unbalanced in the last few months. But it’s starting to become more than just an unpleasant work environment for us. It’s hurting other people.”

“Is Will hurting?” Brian interjects, taking a long slurp of his soda and then throwing his hands up in a gesture of surrender when he realizes that everyone is glaring at him. “What? Okay, so he went to jail. I’m sorry about that, you’re sorry about that. We’re all very sorry about that…. Alana is sorrier than the rest of us, but we all feel it. But hey! Look at him now. He’s got a sugar daddy and a new lease on life. Which is more than the rest of us. I’d say he came out on top here. Who’s with me?”

Brian throws his fist up in the air in a gesture of what Beverly thinks is supposed to be empowerment… and watches as he slowly lowers it again when the three of them only stare at him.

“Okay, fine. I’ll be shutting up now.”

“Thank you.” Alana almost smiles at that. “And I wasn’t talking about Will. At least, not entirely. Someone else is in Jack’s sights. Someone a lot more vulnerable and-”

“Oh, you mean Abigail.” Jimmy nods, stealing all of the steam out of Alana’s drum roll. He seems to realize it half a second later, because his expression twists into something apologetic. “Oh, was that supposed to be a surprise? Sorry. It’s just… Jack’s voice carries. I’d be surprised if there were people in Boston who didn’t hear him talking about it.”

“Yes, I meant Abigail,” Alana says, slightly put out. “I’ve been approved as her therapist on a trial basis. The doctors don’t know when she’ll be waking up and I’ll be allowed to collaborate with the social worker about minor decisions that need to be made for her while we wait and see if she has any family out there who can and will take her in.”

“Odds are pretty slim,” Brian sing-songs. “I mean, we’re looking at a media frenzy here. Especially if Jack makes it public knowledge that she’s under investigation. “My life as a teenage cannibal” is more B-horror film than successful rehabilitation story.”

“And in the meantime,” Alana continues as if Brian hadn’t said anything. “I won’t be able to consult on the investigation anymore. Jack has already suggested that it’s a conflict of interest, since I disagreed with his decision to label her a criminal before we’ve even been able to take her statement. Which means I won’t be invited back to the Cabin anytime soon. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t mind because my patient should be my priority. But.”

“Jack is on the warpath,” Beverly surmises. It doesn’t take a genius to make that leap. “And not exactly opposed to cutting corners to make the evidence match his conclusion.”

“Or making us cut those corners.” Jimmy agrees, wrinkling his nose. “It was bad enough having to go over Will’s life with a fine-tooth comb to prove he was a killer. I don’t really want to do that to a kid.”

“Of course, you don’t. None of us would,” Alana agrees, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth to bite down on it. “Which is why I need to ask something unethical of you. All of you.”

“I am *not* making a sex tape with Jack Crawford, no matter how much you pay me.”

“Do you want me to put him outside?” Jimmy asks, kicking his husband under the table. “I brought his CD. He’ll be fine in the car.”

“Abigail Hobbs is a seventeen-year-old girl,” Alana says, ignoring both of them with a fierce look in her eyes that dares further interruptions. “She’s just lost both of her parents and – and who knows what else? I don’t know how much there will be left for her to wake up to. There’s already been talk of the victim’s families getting whatever money that Garrett Jacob Hobbs had to his name. Not to mention the fact that Jack could think she’s the next holy mother Mary and she’d still be the target for a lot of people who hate her father. She needs help. She needs our help, however we can give it.”

“Okay, look.” Brian sits up his seat, dodging the kick that Beverly aims at him, to try and shut him up before he can say anything else stupid. “No, seriously! I’m not gonna make a joke. I get it, okay? No one wants to see this kid get anymore hurt than she already has been.

But what do you really think we can do? We couldn't even stop Will from going to prison... not that I was trying that hard, but Beverly was digging her heels into the dirt about it. What's the goal? Are we trying to convince Jack to change his mind? Ambushing him with an intervention? Faking the kid's death and moving her to Aruba to start a new life with an assumed name? I just want to know what we're really doing here."

"I'm not asking you to do anything more than try to stall, a little. She… Hannibal is going to help her with any legal battles." The expression on Alana's face says just how little she thinks of that idea, but she keeps going anyway. "I just need you guys to keep an eye on Jack. Be a witness when he gets out of control and maybe be a little bad at your jobs, this time."

"Oh, that's all?" Brian relaxes, sitting back against the booth. "Lady, I'm bad at my job every day. I can fuck up in my sleep. Consider it done."

"…Thank you?"

Alana's gaze shifts to Jimmy, who shrugs.

"I'm pretty good at what I do, but I think I can be particularly spacey for the next few weeks. Blame all this fresh air. It's disgusting. My lungs feel like they're getting caviar after years of hot dogs. That's enough to make any man falter."

"Not to be the Debbie Downer here," Beverly says, drawing everyone's attention to her. "But…Alana, are you sure getting involved with Abigail's recovery is a good idea if Will and Hannibal are going to be involved too?'

"I don't know what you mean." Alana says, her voice cooling a little. "My difficulties with Will have nothing to do with Abigail. I can't just sit by and let her suffer because Will and I have been struggling to reestablish our friendship."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"It doesn't matter what you're talking about. I am perfectly capable of putting aside personal feelings to help someone in need. I guess the real question here is… are you?"

"I'm not the one who's been working in close quarters with Jack for the last five months. I just… I don't want to see you getting involved with Abigail if it's just a way to try to rebuild that bridge with Will."

"…I gotta pee," Brian interjects, suddenly standing. "Jim?"

"Oh! Uh, me too."

"We'll be back."

Beverly rolls her eyes and folds her arms over her chest, watching as they start to scramble out of their seats, like animals taking shelter from an incoming storm… and leaving her alone with Alana, who's self-righteous fury is only burning hotter and hotter by the minute.

“What is this about?” Alana asks, lowering her voice to a whisper as another waitress comes coasting by. “Do you really think I’m only trying to help Abigail Hobbs because I want to be in Will’s good graces again?”

“I *think*,” Beverly stresses the word. “that I want to hear you promise that you’re not getting into this for the sake of getting close to Will again before I agree to anything.”

“This isn’t about Will!” Alana lies, trying not to fidget too much in her seat when she does. “It’s about Abigail. Doing the right thing for her, helping her through this…. And maybe, just maybe, not letting one mistake define me for the rest of my life!”

The petulance in her voice is enough for Alana to gag on, but she can’t help the way that she *whines*. She’s so tired of it all; the scrutiny, the judgement, the way that everyone looks at her like she was the only one with Will’s blood on her hands when this was all said and done. They’d *all* been there. They *all* did nothing to stop what was set in motion. But she was the only one who was still being punished for it.

“Look, I’m not trying to put you on trial here.” Beverly raises her hands slowly, a gesture of surrender that doesn’t match the sharp look in her eyes. “Whatever is going on with you and Will is between you and Will. I just… I’m trying to avoid repeating my own mistakes too. I followed you and Jack before and it hurt someone that didn’t deserve it. I don’t want that to happen again.”

Beverly’s sincerity is as sweet as it is frustrating. Alana envies it, the innocence that she gets to have on the other side of this. Her lack of friendship with Will before he went to prison was the only thing that made her close to him now. And Alana… she wants that. Wants to be his confidant again; wants to know what he’s thinking, what he’s doing, and how she can help.

Does Beverly want any of that from him? Or is she content being on the fringe of his life, offering a witty joke here and there but never getting close enough to see him for who he really is and what he really needs? And if it is the latter, does she derserve that closeness at all?

Maybe it’s none of Alana’s business anymore. But it’s starting to rub her the wrong way. Sandpaper smoothed down against her already raw skin, ripping her to pieces.

“I don’t want that to happen either.” Alana swallows back the miserable tirade of questions she has no right to ask and tries to force a smile. Tries to let it go; to focus on the right things. “But I already talked to Will about this. He knows that I’ll be involved and – and I think he’s happy to hear it. The more people that there are on Abigail’s side, the more likely it is that we can save her from going through what he did.”

The waitress returns with three cups of coffee and an iced tea, setting the glass in front of Alana before Beverly can respond.

“Your dinner will be ready in a couple minutes,” she says, either oblivious to the tension in the air or ignoring it completely. “You gals aren’t from here, are you? Travel far?”

“Nope,” Beverly says, smiling tightly. It’s an expression that Alana tries to mimic. “Short plane ride, actually.”

“Well, I hope you folks get to see the nicer parts of our city. Not just all that nasty business happening up the road.” She lowers her voice conspiratorially. “Word is, they found a pile of bodies in the forest.”

“Really?” Alana asked.

'Mmmhmm.” The waitress nods, fishing a straw out of her apron for Alana. “Cops had to gun down a whole family of Cannibals. Right around here! Can you believe that?”

“Sounds like something out of a horror story.”

“I know! Well, you all try to have a nice time anyway. We’ve got more going on ‘round here than just a couple murders. Be right back with your food.”

Smiling, she hurried away to disappear back through the door that presumably led to the kitchen… and Alana’s cheery expression melted from her face like butter.

“Shit,” she swears, tearing the paper off the straw meant for her tea. “I completely forgot to check Lounds’ website.”

“Lounds?” Beverly repeats, picking up her coffee and blowing onto it. “Is there another TattleCrime post?”

“Will found a hair on one of the evidence bags that looks awfully familiar. I don’t know for sure, but I’m sure Jack’s on the case. Maybe that’s why he let us all leave the scene – doesn’t want Freddie to sink her claws into any of us now that Will isn’t such a good source for clicks.”

“Are you kidding?” Beverly shoots Alana a look of disbelief over the rim of her coffee cup. “FBI agent accused of cannibalism is actually innocent, attacked by another cannibal, and now helps the FBI crack down on a man who’s been eating girls for months. If she can’t profit off of that series of unfortunate events then she seriously needs to change professions.”

Alana grimaces. “Now who needs to figure out where to draw the line with interacting with Will? Freddie Lounds is the last person you should be encouraging to write about him.”

Beverly rolls her eyes. “Oh, please. If she was in the Shrike Nest? Jack is having her killed as we speak. The way he handles Lounds is the one thing he still does right."

Well, at least there's something they can both agree on. "Amen to that."

Chapter End Notes

I was fighting for my life out here, trying to write this chapter. I feel like I'm pelting all of my ducks with subpar crumbs of bread instead of peas this time, but the next chapter should make up for it. Let's just all be glad that we made it through this one together.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abigail can feel his cold breath on the back of her neck, but she isn't brave enough to turn around and face him yet.

Fear feels like surrender.

Surrender feels like compliance.

Compliance is *blood* and it drips off the knife that he's holding to her throat, falls like rain to collect in pools of crimson in the shallow dips of her collarbones until it spills over, crying ruby tears down her chest, soaking through the fabric of her nightgown.

(She was thirteen when he came into her room for the first time. Two a.m. on a school night, but he said he just had to show her his new hunting knife. The cut was an accident, but it stained. Dad threw the nightgown out and asked her not to tell.)

The hands of the shadows, wispy and dark, reach out from all corners of her bedroom with fingers that swipe at the air just inches from her. The darkness is a living creature with a bloodlust almost as insatiable as her father's and it wants her. It calls to her in a thousand different voices, as cold as ice, and in a language that she can't decipher. But the longing in every echo of its archaic whispers is universal in its intensity. Whispers that slowly grow louder and then louder still, until it's *screaming* at her.

The wallpaper that adorns her room begins to peel away, melting down the walls into puddles of colourful slurry on her floor that soaks into the carpet, as if it couldn't withstand the terrible, unearthly wailing.

(Her dad wallpapered her room with his own two hands; picked something sky blue and with puffy clouds so she could pretend that she was flying. She was fifteen when he came back to her room, smelling like whiskey, and dragged the blade down the wall, asking her if she wanted to see what heaven really looked like.)

Some of the slurry drips down onto her head and hands from the wall behind her, tickling her skin. Her hands twitch, the impulse to wipe it away quelled only by the fear that keeps her paralyzed and in his grasp.

(He blamed the marks on the cat and tore the paper down. Don't tell Mom, Abs. It'll only make her upset. You don't want to see us fighting, do you?)

The hands of the shadows reach past her, now. They rip at the air above her and tear into the ceiling. The sound is nauseating; the plaster doesn't crumble; it *rips* like human flesh. She doesn't want to look, but he makes her tilt her head back and stare up into a mirror that she doesn't remember being there before.

…And she sees herself, looking back with wide, fearful eyes.

But her reflection is not huddled back into the corner of the bed with her back pressed against his chest. No, she's lying back against the mattress as if pinned there, tendrils of hair clinging to her sweat slick face and neck. Her reflection opens her mouth as if to scream, but no sound comes.

Abigail wants to look away, but she can't. She's hypnotized, terrified to blink lest they both fade from existence the moment she does. And this reflection, her twin self, she tries to scream again; the muscles of her throat pulled tight eyes nearly bugging from their sockets. But the effort is still in vain and her reflection *sobs* with frustration.

The tears fall from the mirror and wet Abigail's face, sliding down her cheeks as if the anguish is her own. *Help me,* her reflection says soundlessly, lips moving silently to form the words. *Help me.*

A shadowy hand wraps around her reflection's ankle and pulls them both from the bed.

The floor is hard when she hits it and the impact dislodges the scream from her throat. Panic, instinctive and strong, sends her scrambling across the carpet on hands and knees. She grabs onto the handle of her bedroom door and uses it to pull herself up, pushing hard against it and flinging it as wide as it will go, tossing herself into the hallway…

And landing face-first onto a sandy shore.

Bright sunlight and a warm breeze greet her as she blinks the grit from her eyes and spits it from her mouth. The darkness is gone and the warmth here erases the chills that it had brought as though they had never existed at all.

(They go to the coast every summer. It's the only time that her family feels *real* to her. Dad doesn't come into her room at night, doesn't burden her with the weight of his love or make her pray with him for one more night where he doesn't hurt her. He smiles and mom smiles and Abigail smiles. Her parents dance while Elvis warbles from Dad's old radio and they seem like they love each other and it's *perfect.*)

She pushes herself to her feet and spins a single rotation in place, taking in the sight of it all. Brightly coloured umbrellas dot the shoreline, casting shade over carefully laid out towels, but there are no other signs of life at all.

And she's still in her nightgown.

But neither of those things seems to matter. With the darkness so far behind her, she can't bring herself to care. Instead, she runs alongside where the sea rushes to greet her and foams at the mouth. It glitters under the light and stretches to touch her, but always falls just short of where her bare toes are being warmed by the sand. It's safety and refuge and she finds herself shouting her joy back at the winds that lovingly toss her hair around her face.

The sea shouts back to her, in a voice like polished marble, and the voice of the ocean longs for her.

She's dizzy with joy, deliriously taking staggering steps that push her a little closer than before to where the ocean laps its tongue against the sand and this time the water rushes up to her ankles rather than falling short of her. But it's been pleasantly warmed by the sun and it's so inviting that she takes another step… and then another, letting it reach just below her knees. The hem of her nightgown is getting soaked, clinging to her skin, but the day is so beautiful…

So, so beautiful, the ocean agrees. Its voice pierces the air like a seagull's cry and something slimy wraps around one of her ankles. She kicks her foot, assuming a piece of seaweed drifted too close… but it doesn't come loose and instead stretches its hold, wrapping around her other ankle and tugging.

The water is cold when she falls into it and saltwater rushes up her nose and into her mouth as the tide tries to carry her away. She writhes, grasping the sand and burying her hand down deep enough into its freezing depths to create a hold to tether her until the water has receded.

(They don't go to the coast the summer that she's sixteen. Dad makes her go hunting with him instead.)

The sun is gone when Abigail gets back to her feet. The clouds overhead rumble with thunder and she can no longer see any umbrellas, towels, or signs of life on the shore. She runs to it anyway, desperate to get away before the tide can return and pull her away again. She leaps over a piece of driftwood, closing her eyes as she braces for another impact against the sand…

And tastes mud instead.

She sits on boot trodden ground beneath a dusky sky. It's peppered with glittering jewels, sending their light to shine on the dead trees below.

(Dad's hunting cabin is nearby. He's probably inside. She can't bear to watch what he does, though. Can't bear to see what she lets happen every time she walks out the door with him, another college pamphlet in hand.)

The trees sway without wind, their branches all reaching for the stars above like they might pluck them out of the sky. But when she takes a cautious step forward and a dry leaf crumbles into powder under her foot, they begin to twist.

Their roots make crunching and cracking noises that grate on her ears as they all turn to face her as best as faceless creatures can. And they *bend*, trying to reach for her with their gnarled branches.

(I'm doing this for you, Abs. If I don't kill her, I'll have to kill you. Please don't make me hurt you. I love you so much.)

The voices of the trees hiss like snakes, colder than the shadows of her room, yet far more polished than even the voice of the sea. Their hissing is accented by the snapping of trees too frail to bend so far, and they tumble to the hard ground with tremendous crashes. Of all the

noises, those are the ones that frighten her the most and she takes off like a spooked colt, running down the narrow path between the trees.

Branches whip at her face and hands, and she can feel blood trickling down her cheeks and neck. The pain only makes her run faster, though, fearing that they may tear her to pieces. Vines fall like nets, ensnaring her when she runs into them. Wrapping around her waist, her throat, her wrists. But she snaps them off with her teeth or rips them apart with her hands, viscous fluid dripping from the tattered plants like blood, coating her hands and teeth and tasting metallic on her tongue.

Stop running, the trees say. *Can't you see we're doing this for you? We only want what's best for you.*

But she refuses to listen. Refuses to stop running until she's dropping to her knees and *crawling* through thick bramble instead, thorns catching at her hair and tugging, trying to yank her back. Trying to make her *stay*.

She won't, though. The darkness can coo to her all it wants, but she pulls harder and though the pain is sharp, she is fierce in the way that all frightened animals are and she keeps going until the ground opens up like a mouth and swallows her whole.

And she falls.

She crashes through the sky that had been over her head. The world turned upside down and the stars burning bright before her eyes like the tips of matches before they're snuffed out. There is no up or down, she spills endlessly through this vacuum of space. Darkness envelops her as smooth as silk. It cradles her gently, it rocks her soothingly.

But her nightgown is still wet from an ocean that tried to drown her. Her feet are still muddied from a forest that tried to tear her apart. Her eyes are still burning from the light of dying stars.

And she doesn't trust it now any more than she did before.

"I'm sorry, Abigail," Her father whispers in her ear, pressing the blade of his knife harder against her throat. "I'm so sorry. It wasn't enough… all those girls, it wasn't enough. I'm sorry, Abigail. Please just hold still. Please. I'm going to make it all go away."

He holds her as if she's made of glass and the sincerity in her voice threatens to shatter her. She believes it when he says that he loves her; that he never wanted it to come to this.

(Whatever this is, she brought it out of him. It was her fault. She did this to him, to those girls, to her mother… it was her.)

It's her last act of defiance when she keeps her eyes open as he starts to saw at her throat. And her final surrender to his whims when she starts to drown in her own blood.

It's the guilt that drags her down to the floor, not the pain. Or, at least, that's the sense that her brain makes of it. She lies in a pool of blood; hers, her mother's, and her father's. Lies in the

wreckage where a family used to be and let's the darkness swallow her whole.

(Her last thought is that there's every chance they'll get a do-over as a family in hell.)

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Abigail Hobbs is alone when she opens her eyes again.

Her first conscious inhale *burns* as it catches in her throat and she recoils, the pain sending her reeling before she can even get her eyes all the way open. Everything is a blur. Ill-defined objects with smeared edges like an abstract fingerpainting straight from the unpracticed hand of a toddler.

Disorientated, her hands flutter up to her throat on the instinct to soothe the scorching ache that overwhelms her with every shaking inhale of breath that she draws… and she feels something rough, there, covering her skin.

Bandages?

Panicked, she grasps at the unfamiliar object covering her mouth, next, and rips it off her face. She throws it with all the force she can manage – not much – and desperately begins to remove everything else she feels tugging at her skin when she moves.

Wires run the length of her body like strings or ropes, and she has the horrible vision of being tied down; being tressed up like a living marionette. Her skin screams in protest as she rips off tape and haphazardly yanks out something that feels like a needle in her skin, but her mounting anxiety is louder than any whisper of pain that could bloom across her skin.

There's no understanding, no answers for the half-formed questions that slip through her mind. Only fear to coat her tongue, as slippery and metallic as blood, and there's only one thing in all the world that she can think to do.

"*Mommy!"*

Abigail's mouth opens wide as she tries to scream, the muscles in her neck taut with the effort to make a sound, but nothing comes out of her mouth as her dry, cracked lips form the shape of the desperate plea; a cry for comfort that only lodges in her throat.

She struggles and wheezes, choking on the burn of air, and tears begin to flood her vision and further distort what little she can see, even as it soothes the dry burn in her eyes.

It takes her three long blinks to clear away the sleep residue and then a fourth for her finally understand what she's looking at and where she *is*.

A hospital room.

She hasn't been inside of one since she was seven and broke her arm during an afterschool club for "junior" cheerleaders who let high schoolers toss them around for a few hours while they learned how to show and wave pom-poms, but the smell of disinfectant is one that she's intimately familiar with and she's seen enough medical procedurals to know the sound of a heart monitor when it's flatlining – the sensor that had been hooked up to her was now dangling over the side of the bed next to the oxygen mask and IV that she had ripped out of her arm.

The extended buzz pronounces her dead but she's still horribly, *horribly* alive. Worse still, *alone.* Her cry for her mother hadn't just gone unanswered because she couldn't get the word out. She could scream it as long and as loudly as she wanted, but Louise Hobbs would never come to comfort her again.

Dad killed her.

The fear drains from her body like it's her blood that's carrying it, leaking down her arm, to her wrist, and then over her fingertips to stain the crisp white linens of her hospital bed. Deflated, Abigail slumps back down in the bed and stares up at the ceiling.

This is when the horror should sink in. This is when the sadness should overwhelm her and violate every inch of her thoughts. Her mind should be plagued by anguish or guilt… or *something.*

She should be sad, shouldn't she? She wants to be. But there's nothing at all beneath the tension that just oozed out of her muscles like the steady drip of blood from a deer that her dad hung upside down outside the cabin. Nothing beneath the fear.

She's just empty.

Devoid of her earlier urge to break free of what she thought were ropes tying her down and make a run for it. There's no enemy in here; no horror inside of these walls. Nothing to run from and nowhere to run to.

Dad killed mom. And Abigail let it happen.

If someone – a nurse, a cop, a social worker – had been in the room when she woke up, maybe they'd see it in her eyes. The guilt, the horror, the stain of blood that'd never really wash off. Maybe they'd comfort her, tell her that it wasn't her fault. Maybe she'd even believe them. Let herself pretend, if only for a minute, that her life isn't completely over.

Alone, though? All she can do is lie back and watch the haze of memories that dance in her vision. The morning sun, the sound of her parents laughing as they made breakfast together… the phone call, the way that dad had looked at her before he grabbed the knife from the cutting board and shoved it into mom. The way that she had just *watched* as he cut into her, again and again, before dragging her out of the room.

The way that she had just stood there, waiting for him to come back. Knowing that it was her turn; that the time she borrowed from other girls had finally run out.

At her side, the heart monitor continues to scream like a promise of where she's going or a reminder of where she should be. Part of her wants to slam against it with an impatient fist, shut it up the way that she would the alarm clock in her bedroom. But the rest of her is too exhausted to do much more than blink.

Any minute now, a nurse will come running in with a crash cart that they won't need. Doctors will introduce themselves and tell Abigail that she's going to be fine, even if she won't be, because they won't want to upset her. Police will come in swarms; they'll ask her the same questions repeatedly.

And Abigail will think of her mother and how she lived by looking the other way when she washed the blood out of Dad's clothes and how she *died* begging her husband not to hurt their daughter. And Abigail will think of her father, who lived by loving to *death* and died apologizing even as he cut open her throat and promised her that it was better to die this way rather than live with the weight of that "love" on her shoulders.

She'll think of them, rotting wherever they are now, and then she'd lie to every nurse, every cop, and every journalist that came to ask her questions. She'll look the other way like her mother, and she'll pretend like her father.

Because those lies are the only things that her parents left her. And she doesn't have any idea what else to do.

(***)

It's with eyes half-shut and a yawn wide enough to threaten to dislocate his jaw that Will finally steps out of the bedroom suite, clad only in Hannibal's discarded dress shirt and a pair of boxers, and wearing a frown that could only come from his boyfriend's two-minute trip to the bathroom somehow becoming a twenty-minute excursion, leaving Will alone, cold, and disappointingly un-cuddled.

Which is exactly why he sounds as petulant as he does when he starts to call out for him, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Hannibal, are you…"

Will stops in his tracks as he lowers his hands from his eyes, gaze finding the couch where Hannibal is seated. *Not* nearly as alone as Will was expecting to find him. His frown deepens.

"…ever going to tell me when someone is up here or am I just going to keep scarring surprise guests for life?" he gripes, suddenly feeling a lot less dressed than he actually is, as Alana lifts her hand and offers him a little wave.

"Morning," she calls, a little smile curling her lips.

Her amusement is annoying, but not nearly as much as Hannibal's is. Will glares at him as he stands, dressed in one of his designer robes, and crosses the room to greet him with a chaste kiss.

"My apologies," Hannibal says, not really sounding sorry at all. "Alana surprised me, as well. I was hoping that you had fallen back asleep and didn't intend to wake you before it was necessary."

"Sounds suspiciously similar to the excuse you gave when Jack stopped by yesterday." Will refuses to be so easily placated, leaning into his lack of coffee to resist melting into Hannibal's arms… something that is, admittedly, really tempting.

"I can hardly help it if it is a habit of the FBI to show up unannounced."

"Fine, I'll just stop being naked. Problem solved."

Will doesn't have time to savour the way that Hannibal's face contorts with horror at the thought before he steps around him and goes to stand behind one of the overstuffed armchairs, taking a stab at modesty. It's…weird, being half-naked in front of Alana, who he had once considered being completely naked with.

She doesn't seem to have the same issue. "I appreciate the concern, Will, but I'm not traumatized. I have brothers."

That stings his ego in a way that he doesn't understand, doesn't like, and doesn't want to acknowledge. "I'm compelled to cover myself just the same. And I want your lack of trauma in writing, so I don't have to foot your therapy bill. More immediately, though, why are you here?"

"Get me a pen and I'll jot it down for you," Alana's smile falters, then. "Abigail Hobbs is awake."

"What?"

All the humour – tentative as it is, with his friendship with Alana still only held together by scotch tape and their mutual desire to see Jack kept as far away from Abigail as possible – drains from Will's body and he whirls around to face Hannibal accusingly.

"Why didn't you come get me?" Will's voice raises an octave in his fury, but he throws his hands up before Hannibal can answer. "Never mind. Tell me later. I need to go get dressed."

"Will."

Hannibal catches him by his wrist before he can make it more than half a step to the door, stopping him in his tracks. He tugs lightly and brings Will stumbling into his body, holding him as if to restrain him,

"Abigail is not in any condition for visitors, yet. She only woke up an hour ago – Alana was called because she has been approved as Abigail's psychologist on a trial basis. She's still undergoing both a mental and physical evaluation so they can determine how much longer

she will need to be in the hospital. I didn't want to wake you because I knew you would want to go, immediately, and knowing that it wasn't possible would only upset you."

Enter the mortifying ordeal of being known. Will feels his face growing hot at the truth of Hannibal's words and the knowledge that his irritation is becoming increasingly irrational in a room with two other people who have themselves together.

"…Okay, well, do me a favour and stop being right all the time." Will mutters, trying to force a smile. It feels more like a grimace when it contorts his mouth, though, and he gives up. "Well, then what's the plan? …Is there a plan? There is, right?"

"First." Hannibal shrugs out of his robe and wraps it around Will's shoulders, leaving himself clad in only his silk pajama set that's practically got pretentious written in every stitch. "I'm going to make you some coffee. Then we'll discuss what our options are, as far as protecting her from Jack."

"Maybe you should make tea," Alana suggests, crossing her legs at the ankle and straightening her shoulders. Preparing for a "conversation" like she'd have with a student – something where she explains what she thinks won't be grasped. "A nice, soothing tea."

It's a point of pride for Will that he manages to resist flipping Alana off *while* uncaffeinated, but the look he gives Hannibal when he glances back to gauge Will's interest in the alternative beverage is anything but amused.

"Coffee." He says, flatly. "A terrible, tense coffee."

"As I suspected."

"You bring me hot leaf juice and this marriage is over," Will warns as he begins to shuffle toward the couch where Hannibal had been sitting, rubbing the rest of the grit out of his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"We're not married."

"Yeah, that's how badly you'll have fucked up. First man to ever sign the divorce papers before the prenup."

Will tosses himself down into Hannibal's spot, leaning into the residual warmth left there by his boyfriend's body and offers Alana an admittedly *plastic* smile.

"Jack came to see you yesterday?" Alana asks, thankfully not pushing the coffee issue or hitting him with overexuberance to make up for the thrill that he lacks.

"Mm." Will tilts his head back against the couch and stares up at the ceiling. "Yeah. He said he wanted to talk to me about some article that Freddie Lounds is running. Didn't like it when I pointed out that she spent the last five months calling me a deranged, sociopathic cannibal, so anything that follows up will probably be lackluster, but then Hannibal shooed him away."

"Shooed?" Alana echoes, that amused smile returning.

“Yeah. Basically, unfolded his handkerchief and waved it at him. You know, if his handkerchief had “I’m going to call my lawyer” written on it.”

“He’s a hard man to say no to.”

Will hums at that but doesn’t admit out loud what they both already know; that Will would have caved by now, if he’d been trying to do this stand on his own. Jack knows which buttons to push, and he plays he plays a tune on Will’s nerves that does, somehow, inspire him to catch killers. If Hannibal wasn’t here, keeping Will from falling back into old habits…

He doesn’t need to say what would happen. There’s no sense in admitting just how weak he is when it comes down to it.

“He’s going to want you to see her,” Alana doesn’t seem to have the same “don’t state the obvious” rule.

“And you don’t.”

Not a question. He can see it in her expression as much as he can hear it in her voice. Something in her, either the psychologist or the woman who worries too much about him, doesn’t want him to get too close. Maybe doesn’t want him to get any kind of close. If this was up to her, it might just be a “sorry I shot your dad” card sent through the mail and then no contact ever again.

“Eventually,” Alana lies, to placate him. “I just think it could be detrimental for you to see her so soon. Sometimes… sometimes it’s better to take a step back before you take a step forward.”

“Better for who?”

“Here you are,” Hannibal interjects lightly, pressing a hot mug of coffee into Will’s hands. “I hope this means we won’t be getting that divorce?”

Will makes a non-committal sound halfway between a grunt and a hum, doing his best impression of a wine snob. He sniffs at the coffee once – smells like…coffee, he guesses. He knows that Hannibal uses fancy beans, but coffee just smells like coffee – before he takes a sip.

There’s no chance of him pretending that it’s inadequate though. The sugar-to-espresso ratio is perfect, and Hannibal added just enough cream to keep it from scalding his tongue without sacrificing too much of the kick in the face that reminds him that he’s still alive.

“Is there anything that you aren’t good at?” Will asks, not for the first time. “Singing? Dancing? Scrapbooking? There’s got to be something.”

Hannibal only smiles that thin smile of mystery at him before he sits on the couch between him and Alana, casually wrapping his arm around Will’s shoulder and ushering him into his side.

“I certainly hope that you’re not troubling yourself over Will’s state of mind,” he says, casually, picking up the conversation where Will had dropped it. “As for Abigail, we simply have no way of knowing how she’ll respond to Will’s presence. He saved her life, she may be happy to see him.”

“When Will sees Abigail, and I do think he should see her,” Alana sits up straighter and absently brushes her hair back from her eyes, preventing any natural shield from her “don’t argue with me” look. “I want it to be on his terms. Not because he feels obligated or because Jack wants him to. Not even because you want him to, Hannibal. I want him to get what he needs as much as I want Abigail to get what she needs. But there’s no rush to get him there, yet. I’m happy to be a buffer between Jack and Abigail as you much as you are to keep Jack from Will. There’s nothing wrong with easing into things.”

“If Will says that he wants to see her when he’s allowed,” Hannibal nods at Will, a silent confirmation that he’s just speaking about him, not for him. “Then he will.”

He pauses, then looks at Will again. “And if you should decide that you are not ready…”

“I’m not the one with the problem about me seeing her.” Will’s tone is pointed enough to draw blood, so he’s careful not to aim it at anyone in particular. “I don’t… I don’t *care* about what Jack wants or what legal issues there are. All I know is that Abigail Hobbs doesn’t have anyone. And I know what that feels like. Just like I know how it feels to suddenly have someone unexpectedly championing in your corner. And if I can do that for her, I’m going to. No one deserves to go through what we’ve gone through alone. But especially not someone who’s basically still a kid.”

Hannibal’s answering smile is smug, but Alana only stares at Will like he just confirmed her worst fears.

“…It’s sweet that you want to be there for her,” she says, gently. “But you can’t be her everyone. And you don’t have to. She isn’t alone without you. She’ll have me in her corner. I’ll fight for her every step of the way.”

“You’ll be just another doctor.”

Will shrugs off Hannibal’s touch, suddenly unable to bear it alongside the frustration of trying to explain himself; of trying to prove that he’s not a bleeding heart running into another hopeless cause because he just can’t help himself.

“She might like you, but she won’t trust you. Especially once she knows that you’re there to evaluate her mental health; that she’s one misworded sentence from being put in a straight jacket. If she has any self-preservation instincts at all, she won’t confide in you.”

Alana bristles. “Because I’ll just run and tell Jack?”

“Because her parents are dead and she’s not quite aged out of the system yet,” Will stares at her dully. “But yeah. There is also your track record. But I wasn’t going to bring it up to her if you weren’t.”

Alana opens her mouth, her eyes flashing… but she snaps it closed again, inhaling deeply through her nose and then nodding.

"I'm… sorry. That was uncalled for," she offers, unexpectedly. "You'd think someone with a degree in psychology would be better at making amends, but it turns out that I'm just as human as the rest of you."

She offers him a weak smile. He doesn't return it, but some of the irritation in his expression softens.

"I really do want you to see her," Alana says again. It's a little less of a lie this time, honest yearning to be in his good graces makes up for the sincerity that she lacks. "Both of you. But I think that the first person she talks to about what happened can't be someone who was there. It invites too much of a possibility of triggering her to relive the moment. We have no idea how fragile she is and we won't until I've done a full, uninterrupted evaluation. Just let me try to talk to her first. And then we'll see about introducing other new characters into her life."

"Of course, we have no intention of impeding your work with her," Hannibal, who had fallen strangely quiet, speaks up again. There's a new energy to his voice, an edge that Will's heard before but is only placing in this moment, like a puzzle piece that had been blurred is suddenly uncensored. "But, I would like to remind you… it will be you talking to her, alongside my lawyer."

"…Your lawyer?" Alana raises an eyebrow. "I understand that you're trying to beat Jack at his own game by making him run through the labyrinth of red tape, but why…?"

"I have the utmost faith in your professionalism, of course. However, it would simply make me feel better to know that there will be someone in the room who can and will remind her that she doesn't have to speak with anyone that she would rather not. And having a record of what you've asked her about will help when Jack goes to interrogate her, next. Keep track of her answers, any variations or any problems so we can sort them out."

"You're talking about her like she's guilty." Alana's voice catches on the word 'guilty' and Will has to pretend he doesn't see the way her gaze flicks to his face.

"I am only planning for all possible outcomes. I made a promise that I would help her however I could, and I intend to keep that promise." Hannibal's tone is still remarkably even, though his gaze grows thoughtful. "As it happens, I had these plans before Will was proven innocent through Matthew Brown's violence."

"Jack better be careful. He's starting to carve out a very niche reputation as being the guy who feeds innocent people to cannibals." Will takes another gulp of his coffee, holding up his free hand. "Miriam Lass, Will Graham… I think if he adds a third name to that list, he gets a free t-shirt from the BSHCI."

Alana gazes at him reproachfully. "That's not funny."

“It was a little funny,” Hannibal reassures. “Though all the more reason to ensure that our lawyer is present during every conversation, in the event that neither of us can be. Yes, even when she’s speaking to someone we trust.”

Trust is a strong word, Will thinks, as he steals a glance at Alana. They’d barely gotten through this conversation unscathed, carried through only by the grace of Hannibal’s easy topic diversions and the cup of coffee in Will’s hands. And though she looks resigned now to Hannibal’s words, he knows there’s some fight left still in Alana; more that they’ll butt heads about before they figure out how to really work together again.

“Will?” Hannibal nudges him. “What are you thinking?”

“Honestly?” Will looks up at him, the barest hint of a smile softening his expression. “Just that if we all get through this without killing each other, it’ll be a miracle.”

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this instead of sleeping. Also fun fact: Abigail's coma dream is an edited piece that I wrote in like, 10th grade and just always had saved with the hope of repurposing it. Never give up on your dreams, kids, and always save your files in at least two separate places.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CANNIBALS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

The Shrike's nest isn't cold yet, but Will Graham is already on the move to take a fledgling killer under his wing.

There are killers --- and then there is Will Graham. Long-time readers of TattleCrime will recognize his name from the high-profile and widely publicized case that was being built against him by the FBI. While a court date was never officially announced, those who knew and worked with him anticipated that he would stand trial for several counts of first-degree murder and finally give a public face to the infamous Chesapeake Ripper.

Justice for the families of all the Ripper's victims was close at hand and may have finally been achieved, were it not for the actions of Matthew Brown, an orderly at the BSHCI. He once again put Will Graham's name in headlines when he brutally attacked both Graham and Fredrick Chilton, BSHCI's esteemed director. While both Dr. Chilton and Will Graham lived to tell the tale, Matthew Brown may not be so lucky. An anonymous source from the hospital where he's being monitored says that he's not woken from his coma yet and the outlook of his survival is bleak.

But was Matthew Brown's attempted cannibalism of Will Graham just a coincidence? The case was dropped against Graham immediately following the attack. Could the price of freedom really be a knife to the gut? While Will Graham's wounds may have been real – this reporter was given the chance to see them firsthand – that's not to say that the rest of the story rings true. Just what exactly did happen after Dr. Chilton was shot ? Was Dr. Hannibal Lecter really the hero who fought Mr. Brown off before giving first aid? Or did he stumble onto a scene so horrific that he's afraid to share the truth for fear of his life? At this time, we can only speculate but both his and Will Graham's silence on the subject is deafening. And without Matthew Brown having the chance to tell us his side of the story, we may never know the truth.

One thing is for sure: death follows Will Graham wherever he goes. And while he never stood trial for the murders he may have committed as the Chesapeake Ripper, there is one life he's finally on the record for taking: Garrett Jacob Hobbs, aka the Minnesota Shrike. Not only was Graham one of the first to arrive on the scene that fateful morning when Hobbs attempted to murder his entire family, but it was the bullets fired from his gun that ended the Shrike's reign of terror.

Another case of cannibalism. And once again, Will Graham was there for it. What are the odds that one man could be so deeply plagued by the concept of "wrong place at

the wrong time"? Was this another simple coincidence or is there something deeper at work here; something sinister that connects Graham to each of these cases. Once again, we can only speculate. But while so many of us are hoping for an end to the tragedies that have rocked our communities, one anonymous whistleblower for the Bureau has given us even more reason to be on edge.

Will Graham's influence and penchant for manipulation spreads beyond the FBI as the whistleblower has admitted to this reporter that Graham, with the help of his "unofficial" psychiatrist, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, the very same Dr. Lecter who saved his life from Matthew Brown, has put in a bid for temporary guardianship over Abigail Jacob Hobbs – the daughter of the shrike.

While there have been no updates on her condition since it was first shared that she was in a coma following her father's attempt on her life, it's safe to say that if Graham's track record is anything to go by: she might be safer in the hospital than she ever will be again. And this reporter can't help but wonder what it is, exactly, about her that Graham is drawn to. Does he see her as Lolita or Legacy? Someone who can carry on the tradition of violence and suffering that her father caused.

If there's only one thing we can be certain about, it's that this is a toxic relationship in the making and I urge all my readers in Minnesota to petition the courts and do all that you can to save this girl from his influence, or my next article may be about a fledgling shrike and yet another life lost in Will Graham's presence.

(***)

"I told you not to read it."

"I know," Will bites out through gritted teeth, setting Hannibal's phone down with shaking hands and sliding it back across the table to him. "But I had to see."

Sitting around the "dining" room table, waiting for a call from Alana about whether they could go and see Abigail had been torture enough… but, of course, Will had to up the ante. And now Freddie Lounds' words are buzzing around the inside of his skull like a swarm of angry bees; accusation after accusation planting a stinger into his brain and refusing to let go.

Wrong place at the wrong time. He'd never heard that phrase used to describe the comedy of errors that is his life, but he has to admit that there's some twisted truth to it. The FBI – his work for Jack… that was the wrong place. Always had been. But he stayed, and he looked, and he put things together. Coming back for more no matter how hard the last time bit him in the ass. There was no coincidence to it, he brought himself here.

If he'd never worked for Jack, he wouldn't have crossed paths with Matthew. Would have never known Hobbs. Both would just be names in the paper, another crop of killings in states

too far away for him to worry about. But he chose this. He put himself here. And now he wasn't the only one who was going to suffer for it.

"We have to break up."

Hannibal pauses in reaching for his phone. "…Well. Ms. Lounds certainly makes an impact, if not the one she intended."

"Hannibal, I'm serious." Will's hands are still shaking. He crosses his arms to hide it. Pretends to be stronger than he is, if only for this moment. "I didn't even know that you requested to be her guardian, but no one is going to believe that, whether they read this article or not. She – Lounds is right. There's a pattern, here. Something that connects me to all of this. And maybe it is just a coincidence, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea for me to be involved with you or – or with helping Abigail."

Hannibal pushes up from his seat opposite Will and, for a second, he thinks that he's going to just leave the room. Hannibal surprises him, though, by instead walking around the table and kissing the top of Will's head.

"Are you hungry?" He asks, completely ignoring everything that Will just said. "The kitchen will likely be serving lunch by now. I'll fetch a menu for you."

Will stares at him.

"…No?" Hannibal asks, meeting his gaze far too calmly. "If you're opposed to the food here, I'd be delighted to take you out. There are a few local restaurants I've had vetted whose kitchen practices are close enough to my standards that I feel comfortable eating there. Some variety might be nice."

Lunch. The man is talking about *lunch*.

"Did you hear a goddamn thing I said?"

Hannibal's gaze cools ever so slightly, but it's still enough to stop Will in his tracks, the rest of his angry speech getting caught up in his throat before he can even think of words to put to the abstract feeling of anger.

"I don't care for rudeness, Will. As you well know." Hannibal's voice is low, but soft. "I'll only remind you this once. And chalk it up to low blood sugar."

Will's got the feeling that he's treading on fragile ground… but he doesn't care. Hannibal's verbal dismal followed by a *lecture* only pisses him off more.

"Swearing is where you draw the line? Seriously?" Will pushes up from his chair too. He can be sitting while Hannibal hovers over him. Not if they're going to fight about this. "It's not the lack of lunch that's pissing me off, Hannibal. It's the fact that you're not listening to me! Don't ignore me and I wouldn't fucking have to be rude! We need to-"

Hannibal moves faster than Will can track; a blur of movement that he can't make sense of until his back is against the wall with Hannibal's chest pressing against his. Will's heart

stutters in surprise and Hannibal's hand presses over his mouth before he can get another word out.

"It's not your swearing I find offensive, Mylimasis." Hannibal's lips are at his ear, voice as quiet at as a deadly snake moving through the grass. "It's the threats to leave me that I find vulgar. You and I have an agreement, do we not? I gave you the chance to go, with the promise that I would never do so again if you chose to stay. Your concern about Abigail is admirable, but it will hardly be of any help to her if I have to set aside my plans to ensure her freedom in order to take you home and keep you locked up somewhere safe until you've changed this new attitude."

With Hannibal's hand pressed over his mouth, there's nothing that Will can say to that. All he can do is *stare* at him with wide eyes as a rush of *lust* sears away the scorch of his anger and leaves him a little weak in the knees. If it wasn't for Hannibal's hold on him, he might have collapsed right then and there.

"I want you to listen carefully," Hannibal continues, as if Will has any other choice. "Abigail Hobbs has no place in my life without you. I have no want for a child that I do not share with you. So, you will stay with me, where you belong. And no one, not Ms. Lounds or anyone else, will take you from me."

This is messed up. The way that Hannibal is talking… the way that he's *looking* at Will… he should be disgusted by the flagrant possession in his tone. Unnerved by the sincerity in his voice when he tells Will that he won't leave. That he isn't *allowed* to.

But he's not. For the first time since he read the article, his hands aren't shaking anymore and he relaxes incrementally, surrendering as much as he can to the hold that Hannibal has on him, both physically and emotionally. He might have even rocked his hips forward; might have invited Hannibal a little closer and begged him to love him with all the brutal passion he sees in Hannibal's eyes. To wear *his* mark.

…But Hannibal's phone rings.

"…My apologies. One moment." Hannibal reaches with his free hand to pull his phone from his pocket, answering it in a much calmer tone than he had been using to address Will. "Hello? Ah, Alana. That was much quicker than I expected. Hm? Yes. We'll be there right away. Thank you."

Hannibal hangs up the phone and Will manages to squirm out enough from his hold to get his mouth free.

"Was that about Abigail?" He demands, staring questioningly at him. "Can we see her?"

"Agent Crawford would like us both at the hospital for a conversation about next steps… so, yes. Alana has said that Abigail seems to be doing well and can receive other visitors, suggesting that we may as well see her while we're there."

"I'll get my shoes." Will says, starting to try to move away from the wall… but Hannibal won't let him budge. "…Hannibal?"

“No more talk of leaving me.”

That’s an order. And one that Will realizes he’s supposed to agree with if he ever wants off this wall again. And while it’s hard to imagine that the words won’t ever leave his mouth again or that the thought won’t occur to him many times over… but he looks into Hannibal’s eyes and knows that this isn’t just about control. He needs to reassurance just as much as Will did.

“I’m not going anywhere without you.”

It’s a promise that pales in comparison to Hannibal’s white-hot passion, but it seems to be enough for him, because he eases back and allows Will space to move again. They appraise each other, both feeling for any signs of lingering anger… and when he knows that there’s none to be found, Will tilts his head up to kiss Hannibal once. It’s a chaste kiss, not at all what he wants it to be… but there are more pressing things to worry about and he’s pulling away too soon, hurrying to find his shoes.

There will be time later. He’ll make sure of it.

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There was something almost preternatural about the silence that hung over the ward that Abigail Hobbs had been unknowingly calling home for the last few days. It wasn’t quite *desolate*, but it was deserted; most flow of traffic had been rerouted while the hospital underwent some superficial remodeling and Dr. Pearson, a friendly with a creased face, had taken the liberty of explaining the decision to keep Abigail Hobbs as the only patient in this wing.

“It’s a delicate situation,” Pearson said, clucking his tongue against the back of his teeth and shaking his head. “Our security team has had their hands full keeping unwanted visitors out. The Press, the true-crime infatuated…”

And the families of the victims, Will surmises from Pearson’s expression when he trails off. Angry parents or siblings who had felt helpless for too long; who had righteous fury inside of them and no place to put it.

“We do appreciate the lengths that you’ve gone to in order to protect Abigail Hobbs,” Hannibal says, smoothly filling the silence when Will can’t or won’t. “I’m quite friendly with the chief of surgery. I’ll be sure to mention your name when I commend him for having a particularly well-run ship.”

Pearson's ears turn red, his back visibly straightening when offered Hannibal's praise. "Well, I appreciate that. But, really, it's a team effort. As often as doctors are on call, it's the nurses who really go above and beyond ensuring the safety of our patients. I'd rather they get the credit, they have been - "

"Dr. Lecter!"

Jack's voice *booms* in the silence and all three of them turn to the sound of shoes scuffling against linoleum as Crawford turns a corner and jogs to catch up with them, holding a hand out as if to keep them standing still by the force of his mind alone.

"Agent Crawford," Hannibal's smile is immediate and warm… making Will the Melpomene to his Thalia. "We were just on our way to meet you. Dr. Pearson mentioned that you have set up quite a base here."

"I've never been one to wander too far away from my work," Jack says in lieu of greeting. His smile is terse, frosting over some of the forced warmth in his tone. A show for the doctor, Will assumes, because Jack's never been one to hold back for an audience before. "Except, of course, when I need some air. Dr. Pearson, thank you for your help but I'm sure that you're a busy man. I can take things from here."

"Of course, Agent Crawford." Pearson looks a little disappointed at the missed chance to continue to talking with Hannibal, but he bows out gracefully. "It was a pleasure to meet you both. Just let one of our staff know when you are ready to go in and speak with Abigail. You'll need an escort to be allowed into the room."

"Of course."

Jack's grin all but melts off his face the second that Pearson turns around.

"Dr. Bloom is waiting for us in my office," he says, gesturing down the hall in the direction that Pearson had already been leading them. "I appreciate your coming here, Dr. Lecter, as well as your willingness to work with us as we figure out where to go from here."

Will doesn't miss the glance that Jack shoots in his direction, the unspoken acknowledgement that the closest they'd get him to work with them on this is if they ditch the suffix. And he smiles blandly, shoving both hands into the pockets of his jeans and pretends that he isn't imagining throttling Jack right then and there.

"I have no desire to impede due process," Hannibal says, as they continue to walk. "Abigail's safety and well-being are my only concerns. If she is treated well, then I have no reason to refuse to assist however I can."

"I'll be the first to admit that things got a little heated the last time we spoke," Jack's tone takes on a wheedling inflection; kissing ass like only a Bureaucrat can. "Cases like these take the hardest toll on us all. But let me be clear in saying that I have no intention of causing Abigail Hobbs any undue harm or stress."

Will snorts. "Hannibal's lawyer put the fear of due process in your bosses, Jack?"

Crawford ignores that jab. “I think you’ll both be happy to know that Abigail is recovering well. I hear that Dr. Pearson was pleased to know that she was able to recover her ability to speak so quickly. Despite the…gruesome appearance of the wound, it seems most of the damage was superficial. She should make a full and easy recovery.”

Full recovery, sure. But easy? Will has to bite his tongue to keep from laughing again. He’d always been able to toe the line of disobedience while he was still working for Jack, but he’s on the outside of things now, with Abigail in state custody. Push too hard or too far and Will might find himself on the outside of the hospital, unable to see for himself that Abigail was okay.

It's an intolerable thought. So he keeps his mouth shut and his gaze on the floor until they reach Jack’s “office”, being quickly ushered inside.

Alana, as promised, is already there. She sits on the opposite side of a cheap desk, absently scrolling through something on her phone. She drops it down into her lap when she hears the door open and turns her head.

“Hannibal, Will.” She stands up quickly, slipping her phone into her pocket and then hovers awkwardly by the desk. “Nice to see you again. Was the drive okay?”

God, deliver him from small talk. Will moves to stand by the wall near the chair that Alana hadn’t been sitting in, content to both miss Hannibal’s breezy answer to the inconsequential question and wait for them to get down to what they really came there for.

He doesn’t have to wait long. Alana returns to her seat and Hannibal gives Will a curious look, clearly weighing the value of trying to force Will to be the one who sits… then gives in to the imaginary argument and settles down gracefully.

“Well, now that we’re all here…” Jack clears his throat as he circles around the desk but makes no move to sit yet. “I suppose there’s no point in beating around the bush, here. This isn’t a routine case; every second is precious. Dr. Bloom, if you would?”

“…I don’t think she’s ready to be questioned yet.”

That’s not what Jack wanted to hear, but it’s clear that he was expecting it. He casts a furtive glance at Will, gauging his expression, before sitting down.

“As much as I appreciate the situation that Abigail Hobbs has found herself in, I will remind you that I have seven families waiting, let me rephrase, demanding that we find whatever’s left of their daughters. Abigail Hobbs is the only person I can ask who might know the truth.”

“You can’t ask her right now.” Alana licks at her lips and shakes her head. “We have to create a safe place for her first or you won’t get any answers.”

“I respect your sympathy for her, Dr. Bloom. I just hope you can appreciate my lack of it. We’ve wasted a lot of time since Hobbs was gunned down. The pressure for answers is only getting heavier and heavier. Right now, that weight is only on me. But Abigail is awake now and despite what you may think, I won’t be the biggest dog in that fight when it comes to

figuring out where the remains of those girls are. The quicker we deal with this, the sooner that she can move on with her life. That we can all move on."

"As Dr. Bloom is Abigail's psychiatrist, I think it would be wise to accept what she is saying as fact. If Abigail needs time, then we must give it to her. No good will come from forcing an issue that she is not ready or able to face."

"The only body we have is the one that Hobbs didn't eat, Dr. Lecter. Seven bodies. Seven girls."

"Seven sisters," Hannibal counters, his expression impassive. "In Abigail's mind, when she learns of her father's crimes."

Jack makes a noise at that; a scoff of disbelief, and Will forgets his vow of silence.

"Still working that accomplice angle, Jack?"

"Her DNA is all over that cabin," there's no shame in his voice. "Is it so unlikely that she didn't already know about these girls? That she didn't see or suspect what her father was doing?"

"The same could be said about the mother," Will curls his hands into fists in his pockets, fighting to keep his voice even. "Or does she not qualify as someone worth investigating because she's not alive to take the punishment?"

"There was not one hair from Louise Hobbs in that cabin, Graham. Our people swept it thoroughly; there's nothing to suggest that she'd ever been there." Jack leans back in his seat, trying to maintain an aura of calm that doesn't all reflect what's raging in his eyes. "If nothing else, it's a possibility that needs to be ruled out. For her own sake, too. The sooner we can close the book on her involvement, the sooner she can go on to lead a normal life."

"How was Abigail?" Hannibal smoothly interjects, bringing the focus back onto Alana. "When you saw her?"

Alana shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "I would say… surprisingly practical."

"Suspiciously practical?" Jack parrots, leaning forward again.

"You can be practical without being a serial killer," Will mutters, crossing his arms over his chest now so that he can try to apply enough pressure to keep himself together. "Everyone processes trauma differently. I wasn't exactly in tears when the two of you hauled me to the BSHCI."

"You're also not a seventeen-year-old girl," Alana chews on her bottom lip. "I think she's hiding something. She showed the capacity for manipulation when I spoke to her. Withheld information in order to get information. Only showed enough emotion to prove that she has the capacity. Psychologically speaking, there's reason to believe that she's not being entirely honest about what she remembers or what she knows."

Jack starts to make a noise of vindication and Alana fixes him with an exasperated glare.

“But I *don’t* think she’s a killer.” Alana continues, voice firm. “It could be something else. She was... just surprisingly alert. She wasn’t dazed. She wasn’t confused. She seemed to have already rationalized exactly what happened to her parents and what she went through.”

“Or compartmentalized. The horror of what she witnessed could be too much to bear contemplation, so she’s simply accepted the surface of it without focusing on the underlying implications.”

Jack grunts. “I want Graham to talk to her.”

“Yes!” Will says while Alana starts to shake her head.

“No. Jack… Will,” She addresses him instead. “It’s too soon. For either of you. I think we could argue for the benefit of Hannibal visiting her, but you were the one who killed her father. If she’s going to have a negative reaction to anyone, it would be you.”

“Then I’ll leave. But we should at least give her the chance to decide how she feels about it. If Jack thinks that I can help…”

“Oh, since when do you care what Jack thinks?”

“I agree with Will,” Hannibal’s loyalty will never cease to make Will feel warm inside. “Abigail is a young girl who must be aware of how people are looking at her. How she is being questioned. If there were anyone who could make her feel both safe and seen, then it would be Will.”

“I’m not saying she should never see him. I’m just asking for a little practicality. I’m just as worried for him as I am for her.”

“With all due respect, you’re not his therapist,” Jack’s teeth are poised and ready to sink into Will’s agreement to work. “And you have no say in which agents I do or do not use. Graham, do you want to talk to her?”

“Yes.” Will says again, more firmly this time. The need to see her… to know that she’s alive and that she hasn’t been destroyed by her father or by Jack, it’s more visceral than ever before. “I do.”

“Then I say let’s get us a nurse and take you to see her.”

(***)

There’s a woman with red hair standing in the doorway.

Abigail sits up straight in her hospital bed, paper sheets crinkling as she props herself up on both palms and stares her down. She’s not dressed like a nurse. No scrubs, no hands full of

medical charts. But she doesn't exactly look like any of those agents that had been hovering around her room either.

"Who are you?"

"A friend." The woman smiles with teeth that are too white not to be bleached. "My name is Freddie. And I'm here because I want to help you."

There's something in her tone that reminds Abigail of the voice that her mother would use when reading to her at night. There was one story in particular about a brave fly who got stuck in a spider's web and the spider who promised to "help" them get free. That's what Freddie sounds like now. Sweetly sinister with no good intentions.

"Help me what?" Abigail asks, glancing at the panel on the side of her bed. One push of a button would call the nurses in, right? "Are you a doctor here or…?"

"No. But if the orderlies ask, I'm special Agent Lounds," there's that smile again. All teeth. "Truth is, I'm a journalist. More importantly, though, is what you are. You have a story to tell. And I want to be the one who helps you tell it."

"You lied to get in here." It's not a question. It's not even a shock. Abigail remembers one of the nurses complaining about the press; saying that there were people who would stop at nothing to get in here and talk to her. "I should probably report you."

Freddie Lounds walks further into the room from the doorway. It's a power walk, the kind that says she's not afraid of whatever she's about to get herself into.

"You could do that. But then you'd be giving up your one chance to get your truth out there. See, my truth is that I had to lie because there are a lot of people out there who want to hurt you, Abigail. And I can fix that for you. You don't have to trust me right away, but I think I can prove to you that I'm worth working with. If you give me the chance, that is."

Abigail fingers curl into her palms, nails biting into skin. *Don't say anything*, a voice in her head whispers; one that sounds suspiciously like her father. *You don't want to cause trouble for us.*

"How about this… I'm sure that the staff here has left you wanting for information. You tell me what you know, and I'll help you fill in the blanks. Paint you the whole picture of the situation that you're in."

Now that's an offer a little too tempting to spit in the face of. There's so much going on outside of this room she's being kept in. She doesn't know what they do or don't know. And if this woman is really a journalist…

"Why don't you tell me what you know first?"

She's not in the position to barter and they both know it, but that doesn't mean she won't try.

"Your father was the Minnesota Shrike."

Strike one. Abigail's fingers twitch for the call button, giving Freddie Lounds the most unimpressed look that she can muster. If that's the best she can do, then this is a waste of time.

"I know that your mother wasn't the first person that he killed," Freddie continues, speaking before Abigail can make her mind up. "He killed eight other girls that we know of. Eight girls who all looked just like…"

"Me." Abigail finishes, without meaning to. It's slip up and one she doesn't want to leave in the air long enough to be deliberated on. "Why… why did they call him the shrike?"

"Actually, I came up with that." Freddie settles down onto the edge of her bed, crossing her legs at the ankle and patting Abigail's knee in a gesture that she guesses is supposed to be comforting. "It's a bird that impales its prey and harvests his organs to eat later."

Abigail feels the blood leave her face. "He ate them?"

The sympathy in Freddie's eyes is sickly sweet like sugar water in a dry mouth. "He was sick."

It shouldn't be as hard to hear that as it is. It's a simple truth, after all. Grass is green, the sky is blue, and her father was sick.

"Does that mean I'm sick too?"

It's not a question that she really expects to get an answer to, but Freddie leans a little closer, eyes too bright with interest. With desperation. She's seen that look in her father's eyes before, the symptom of a sick addiction.

"That's a perception that you're going to be fighting. And trust me, perception is the most important thing in your life right now."

No. No more fighting. She doesn't have enough left in her to keep struggling up this particular hill. "I don't care what anyone thinks of me."

"You better start caring, Abigail. You've been out for a while and time has only fed the rumour mill. What you remember? What you tell people? It's going to define the rest of your life. Saying nothing will only make you look like you have something to hide. Let me tell your story and I can carve you a path in this world to survive what your father did rather than let you be punished for it."

Punished.

That word sticks out to Abigail; digs into her skin like a knife. Hasn't that been her whole life already? Punished for being born, punished for being *loved*. Punished for whatever it is inside of her that made her dad so twisted up.

When does it end?

When does she get to be the bird instead of the prey?

“How did they catch him?” she croaks out.

“A man named Will Graham.” For the first time, that sickly sweet exterior slips and Freddie’s face contorts with anger. “He works for the FBI, but he isn’t a real agent. He catches insane men because he can think like them. Because he’s just as insane as the rest of them.”

The door to her room practically slams open then, making Abigail jump. Too orderlies, dressed in scrubs, storm into the room flanked by two men with horribly familiar faces.

The men who came to her house. The ones who saved her life. The ones who murdered her father.

“Speak of the devil,” Freddie says smoothly and Abigail studies their faces, wondering which one is Will Graham.

“Get out.” The shorter man grinds out.

Freddie stands but makes no move to head for the door. She blocks the path to Abigail instead. “I’m not leaving you alone with her, Graham. You and I both know what happens when doors close around you. Fredrick sends his regards, by the way.”

“Please remove Ms. Lounds from the room,” The taller man says, intervening before he – Will Graham – can respond to what must have been a pretty pointed comment. “And I would like her barred from not only this room but the hospital for the foreseeable future. My lawyer will, of course, be looking into how she was able to gain access to this room in the first place.”

“And the infamous Dr. Lecter. You never did give me your name before. How wonderful to see you again,” Freddie reaches into the pocket of her coat as the orderlies starts to try to usher her out. She side-steps them and holds a business card out to Abigail. “You survived a lot, Abigail. Don’t let Will Graham ruin your life the way he’s ruined so many others. And don’t be afraid to call me if you need anything.”

She doesn’t have time to think about taking it. Will grabs the card from Freddie’s hand and tears it in half, letting it flutter to the ground.

“I don’t think she’ll be needing anything from you. Something I’m sure she’ll agree with once she’s seen the article you wrote about her already. Hannibal?”

“I really must insist that you leave,” the other man says, opening the door a little wider so that Freddie can be escorted out in the grip of the orderlies.

Abigail watches her go, uncertain if she’s relived or disappointed. Freddie Lounds was either a missed opportunity or a dodged bullet. She just wishes she had been given the time to decide which on her own.

“…I’m sorry about that,” Will Graham says, breaking the silence. “She shouldn’t have been able to get in here.”

People do a lot of things that they shouldn’t be able to.

“She wrote an article about me?”

“Yes. Look, ah… I’m special agent Will Graham and this is my partner, Dr. Lecter. Do you… do you remember us?”

Does she remember? Remember bleeding, gasping, terrified? Lying in a pool of her own blood, the sound of gunshots still ringing in her ears as they fought to keep her from dying there on the floor?

“I remember,” she says, quietly. “You killed my dad.”

Will opens his mouth… and then closes it again. Apparently at a loss for words. Abigail doesn’t blame him. What is there to say after something like that?

“…Thank you,” Abigail says, because it seems like the right thing to say. And because part of her means it. “You saved my life.”

Will looks down at the floor. Abigail wonders if he’s remembering the day as clearly as she does. If he still smells the blood and hears the gunshots.

“I can’t take all the credit for that. Dr. Lecter was much more help to you than I was.”

Abigail’s gaze flickers to him. She’d been so focused on Will… so intent on figuring out if she could see alleged insanity in his face as clearly as she had known it in her father’s, that she hadn’t really thought much about the other man.

“I appreciate both of you.” She offers. “Really, I do.”

“Your appreciation is kind, but unnecessary. We are both just pleased to see that you are recovering so well after what you have been through.”

Abigail thinks that her heart stops beating for a minute. There’s a pause in everything inside of her; a moment where time itself freezes. Her blood doesn’t run through her veins, her cells don’t divide, nothing. In that moment, everything falls away. This room, the hospital around it, and the world beyond that.

There’s nothing at all but the two of them and the sound of his voice, echoing in her ears.

May I speak to Garrett Jacob Hobbs, please?

We are both just pleased to see that you are recovering so well after what you have been through.

Abigail hears both sentences echoing in her ears and she knows exactly who she’s looking at before the next beat of her heart. Her lips tremble with the force of the accusation that she won't let out past her teeth but something flashes in his eyes and she knows that he knows.

The man on the phone.

Chapter End Notes

God, I love a good cliff hanger. But if you don't and feel like you are entitled to financial compensation, join our Hannibal discord and you can yell at me there.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I've got to hand it to you
You've played by all the same rules
It takes the truth to fool me
And now you've made me angry

- I Can't Decide by Scissor Sisters

The scent of Freddie Lounds' perfume lingers in the air where she had been standing just moments ago and hangs oppressively over Will, coating his mouth with thick and wet feeling like blood and grime with every breath that he breathes in. Warm notes of brown sugar and fig have never felt so toxic and corrupting; have never felt so much like the cold metal of handcuffs biting into his skin, reflecting the glare of buzzing fluorescents overhead.

Blink once and he could be back there at the BSHCI, chained up like an animal and forced to sit across from her as she gleefully describes exactly how good it feels to see him there. How damn *pleased* she is to sit back and watch him rot there.

"I really am sorry that your room wasn't more secure," Will says as he rubs the palms of his hands against his jeans. Trying to use friction to scrape away the urge that he has to wrap his fingers around Lounds' slender throat and squeeze until he's crushed her windpipe and finally blocked the flow of her sickly-sweet vitriol for good. "It's not going to happen again."

Abigail's gaze is slow to leave Hannibal's face but when she does finally look at Will, there's sympathy in place of the wariness that he had been expecting. "Does she think you're insane because you killed my dad?"

"No," Will answers honestly. "But it probably didn't help. All you need to know about Freddie Lounds is that she's not the ally she wants you to believe that she is."

Abigail bows her head and looks down at her lap instead of at him, lacing and unlacing her fingers together. "she said that everyone thinks that I – that I'm just like my father. That people want me to pay for what he did. And earlier, when I was talking to Dr. Bloom, it felt like I was in trouble or something. Like I had all the wrong answers to all her questions even though we were supposed to just be talking about how I feel. Is that why you're here now? Am I going to be arrested or something?"

"What? No. No, you're not… No." Will shakes his head, knowing damn well that he shouldn't be promising her something like that, but it doesn't feel like a lie when the words

leave his mouth. “Hannibal and I aren’t here to arrest you or psychoanalyze you. We’re just…”

He has to look at Hannibal, then, realizing that he has no idea what they are. Friends? A defense team? Apparently making a bid for temporary custody?

“You are currently under investigation for possible involvement,” Hannibal says as he steps closer to Will and places a hand at the small of his back. Steadying him. “That is why I have my lawyer involved and working to prove your innocence.”

Surprise flits across Abigail’s face. “You hired the lawyer?”

“Yes.”

“…Why would you do that?”

Abigail’s nostrils flair and suspicion breaks through her mask of quiet calm. Will can’t blame her for that – if he can’t find the language to describe what they are to her, now, then he can’t imagine that it makes anymore sense to her. The first and last time she saw them was in what she must have thought were her final moments, with the smell of blood and gunpowder in her nose and the echo of her father’s rasping, deranged voice in her ears. Whatever she thinks of them, it has to be warped by trauma. As confused and twisted as the rest of the experience must have been for her.

“Because you need help,” is what Will finds himself saying, when nothing more intelligent comes to mind. “And believe it or not, I know exactly what you’re going through.”

Abigail’s mouth quirks into a sardonic approximation of a smile and she sits up a little straighter, the paper sheets on the hospital bed rustling. “Really? Your dad murdered a bunch of girls who looked like you and then cut your throat open? Small world.”

“No.” Will admits, watching vindication light up Abigail’s eyes before continuing. “But I was falsely imprisoned for murders I didn’t commit and then gutted and almost eaten by an orderly who did not want me to be released. Same difference, really.”

Abigail’s lips round out into an “O” of surprise, her gaze flicking back and forth between Will and Hannibal’s to seek out any sign of deceit. And when she finds none, she exhales slowly.

“Are there a lot of people out there that are like my dad?”

It’s not the question that Will was expecting to hear from her, but it’s one that he’s been prepared to answer his whole adult life. “Yes. And no. There aren’t as many as you’d think. But more than you’d like.”

“Does that mean that I could be like him?” Her gaze is desperate. Searching. She stares at him with the gravity of a death row inmate waiting for the plunger to be pushed down on her lethal injection. “That I’m sick too?”

Will wants to tell her no.

He wants to take her hands in his and promise her that she's nothing like her father and that she never will be. But he knows the shape of the stain on her psyche; the bitterness that will fester inside of her at the unfairness of it all. The way that still being alive doesn't mean that she didn't lose her life. Everything she knew and whoever she was before Garrett Jacob Hobbs held that knife to her throat is little better than a memory.

Her gaze is daring him to tell her no and spare her feelings with the pretty lie that she wants to hear, but he knows that she'll resent him for it the same way that he resents everyone who acts like things are back to normal now that he's no longer in prison.

He won't do that to her. "I don't know. You've been through a lot, Abigail, and it's not over yet. You can't come back from something like this and still be the same person you were when it started. You'll be someone else. Maybe someone angrier; someone that others would call sick. There's no way to know where you're going until you get there. But you don't have to go it alone. I…"

Will glances at Hannibal and smiles gently before amending – "*We* will be with you through it. And no matter who you end up being or what you do from here, the only thing you need to know now is that you didn't deserve this."

"Neither did they."

Will doesn't need to ask who she means. Images of co-eds dance through his head. Elise Nichols butchered body, cages of bones, heads of dark hair and blank blue eyes…

"So. You guys are… going to help me." Abigail takes a deep, shuddering breath. "That's good. I think I need that. The lawyer and the security, I guess, if people really do think that I deserve to be punished for what my dad did."

She's all business now. A flip of a switch. And Will can see why Alana had considered her too practical; can see how she confused compartmentalizing with keeping secrets.

"If you guys are going to help me, then can you do something for me?"

Will shoots an uneasy glance at Hannibal, who smoothly answers for him. "Within reason, yes. What do you need?"

"To go home." Her answer is immediate and absolute. "I want to go home."

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"Absolutely not." Alana says, rounding on Will as soon as the words are out of Hannibal's mouth. "Will, you know better than anyone that what Abigail wants and what she needs are two very different things."

Will throws his hands up in a gesture of surrender and takes a step back. “I didn’t suggest it to her, Alana. This is just what she asked for. Are you really that surprised?”

“Only that you two didn’t immediately tell her no.” Alana looks at Hannibal next, who meets her gaze with bland politeness. “Taking her out of a controlled environment would be reckless. She needs more time to heal.”

Jack drums his fingers against his desk, drawing their attention back to him. “Dr. Bloom, you did say that Abigail was practical.”

“She knows what she wants to do to move forward. Or at least thinks she does. But knowing isn’t the same thing as doing, Jack. Right now, she’s distant from what happened. She hasn’t taken the time to really accept the reality of her situation. If you take her home now, she may experience intense emotions and respond aggressively. She might even reenact some aspect of the traumatic event without realizing it. You can’t possibly justify jeopardizing her safety like that.”

Jack looks right past her. “Dr. Lecter?”

“Alana is right,” Hannibal says and Will watches triumph bloom across her face briefly before he continues. “However, there is also the possibility that returning to her home is what she needs to fully embrace the reality of the situation and prevent denial. It’s possible that the mental distance she has from what has happened is in part due to the physical distance that has been put between her and the event.”

“…Will?”

Jack says his name reluctantly, offering him the chance to chime in. And the weight of everyone’s gazes are suddenly on him. Irritated, Will rubs his palms against the sides of his jeans again.

“I don’t think she’s thinking about what happened to her or her parents,” Will mutters, staring past the three of them. “Right now, she just feels trapped. If people aren’t staring at her with sympathy, then they’re starting at her with suspicion. People can walk in and out of her room, needle her with questions… there’s no privacy. No room to breathe. She needs space and I think she should get it.”

“Will, is it possible that you’re just pro - ”

“It’s only projection if I’m wrong about what she’s feeling. And I’m not.” Will interrupts, meeting Alana’s exasperated look with a glare of his own.

“We clearly have a difference of opinion here,” Jack says, before Alana can think of a way to counter that. “And I think I’ll agree with the opinion that best suits my agenda. I’ve got more than one higher up who wants this case closed sooner rather than later, which means that Abigail Hobbs does not have the luxury of time. Not while there are still seven girls missing. First thing tomorrow morning, you three are taking her back to her house. Going over the scene. See if there’s anything she remembers about that morning that she hasn’t said already.”

“Fine. But if we’re taking her back there, then it should at least just be me and Hannibal.” Alana’s face flushes with anger, but it’s a pale shade compared to the red that Will sees.

“I got my doctorate in psychoanalysis with higher honours than you did,” Will says, hotly. “So, if we’re having a PHDick measuring contest, then I’d say that I have just as much to offer as the two of you combined. And then some, seeing as how I’m the only one who actually understands exactly how she feels.”

He pauses… and then glances at Hannibal. “Sorry.”

“Whatever for?” Hannibal’s carefully composed expression softens with the hint of a smile. “I agree with you.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest that you’re not capable. But Will, you killed her father to save her life. It’s not hard to see how Abigail could see you as her saviour. If you don’t measure up to her internal expectation of who you are, then it could set her off. And she might take out whatever rage she feels for her father on you.”

“And I’ll deal with that. When and if it happens.”

“Abigail has already expressed feelings of comradery with Will. Not only because he saved her life, but because of their similar experiences.” Hannibal’s voice is level but firm enough to stop Alana in her tracks when she begins to try to argue again. “I watched the two of them interact. If she feels not only safe with but understood by him then it stands to reason that any progress she might make when taken back to her home would be impeded without him.”

“The three of you.” Jack says, more firmly this time. “You’ll go and you’ll do whatever it takes to tie this thing up. If not for the sake of the families of the missing girls, then for her sake. Abigail Hobbs needs this to be over just as much as everyone else does.”

Jack doesn’t give a rat’s ass about Abigail and all three of them know it, but Will bites his tongue to keep from saying as much. No point in stirring the pot with him when, for once, he’s working in Will’s favour. He casts one last withering glance at Alana instead, feeling that the duct tape holding their alliance together is starting to peel off again, before he turns back to Hannibal.

“Tomorrow, then.” Hannibal says, maintaining his composure even when Will can’t. *Especially* when Will can’t. “I’m certain that the three of us can handle whatever there is to come.”

“I’m not worried about us,” Alana says, her face still splotchy with anger. “We have no idea what’s waiting for Abigail when she gets home or how she’ll handle it.”

Will can’t resist. “Well, as long as no one gets shot it’ll be one of your better house calls. Leave the wire at home and what’s the worst that can happen?”

In the morning light of a new dawn, Abigail's welcome home is an eight-foot-tall scribble of graffiti across the front of her house and a rust-coloured stain of red on the front step.

Mom.

This is where she died, Abigail knows without being told. She hadn't seen her father drag her to the front door or throw her out into the cold, but she'd heard it. The sound of steel cutting through flesh, her mother's screaming, the thud of a body hitting concrete and then the slam of the door behind her. Locking her out.

Locking Abigail in.

"I was sort of expecting a body outline," she says, when no one else tries to break the silence. "You know, in chalk or tape. Like they do on TV."

"They only do that if you're still alive and taken to the hospital before they finish the crime scene."

"*Will.*"

Dr. Bloom hisses under her breath at him, but the words wash over Abigail with a dull sort of relief. Mom had died quickly. She wasn't left to suffer for long. She was at rest now, wherever she was. She didn't have to live with this.

It must be better that way.

"Goodbye, mom."

Her voice is thick in her throat and her eyes sting, but she blinks back her tears furiously as she steps over the stain and fishes her house key out of her pocket. In the familiar motion of unlocking her front door, it's almost too easy to pretend that she's just getting home from Marissa's house. That her dad will call out from the living room to make sure it was her – who else would it be? – and that there will be some kind of snack on the counter waiting for her.

But then the door opens to darkness and the illusion is snuffed out by the rush of cold air that greets them. Abigail unconsciously wraps her arms around herself, lingering in the doorway. Almost afraid to step inside; afraid of the silence where her parents' voices should be as much as she's afraid of the thought of hearing her father call out for her.

"You don't have to do this," Dr. Bloom says, when Abigail doesn't immediately try to go inside. "We can leave now. All you have to do is say that you want to go, and we'll go."

"Go where?" Abigail asks, looking over her shoulder at her. The scarf that she's wearing over her bandage scrapes against her skin in an almost suffocating way. "Back to the hospital?"

"For now."

Abigail presses her lips into a tight line but says nothing as she finally forces herself to keep moving, stepping through the doorway, and automatically looking to the walls and floor for anymore stains, any more evidence of her mother's life. Or at least the end of it.

But there's nothing. Whoever oversaw cleaning up crime scenes had scrubbed away everything. The trail of blood that she follows unconsciously to the kitchen only exists in her mind's eye. Everything is… pristine. Like it never happened.

Like it was all a nightmare. One that she just can't seem to wake up from. All that's left to prove to her that this was where she almost died is the harsh scent of bleach. And the silence. The heavy, unbearable silence.

It's maddening. She has to say something, so she turns to Will. "I was expecting more Saw than Property Brothers. Are crime scenes always so… clean after?"

"I don't know," Will says. "I don't usually see them after. Hard to profile a crime scene when the evidence is gone."

"You would walk through places like this a lot?"

"All the time. Too often."

"Did you do that here? After I was taken away?"

He looks past her, then. At the spot on the floor where she knows that her blood used to be. "No. They wanted me to. But I couldn't do it."

"Is it that hard ? To come to places like this and pretend to be people like my dad?"

"It's too easy." Will corrects, still looking beyond her. Abigail wonders if he's seeing it now. The blood. The bodies of her and her father, lying side by side on the kitchen floor. "Like wading into a river. If I'm not careful enough, I can get swept away and drown in it."

Dr. Bloom makes a sound in the back of her throat. The kind of noise that people do when they think too much has been said and a dull flicker of irritation pulses through Abigail.

"They don't want you to be telling me this," she surmises, pretending that they can't hear her. That it's just the two of them going through this together. No nosy psychiatrist. No man on the phone. "I can handle it, though."

"Dr. Bloom doesn't like me telling anyone about it," Will says, finally looking back at her. "Don't take it personally. What I do just isn't a topic for polite conversation."

"I was almost murdered. I don't think that's a polite conversation to begin with." Abigail almost smiles. "I like that you're honest with me. I want to understand like you do."

A shadow crosses Will's face. "No. You don't."

She almost opens her mouth to argue but Dr. Lecter is faster. He side-steps Dr. Bloom gracefully and takes Will's hand in his own, drawing him into his side.

“While I understand your interest in Will’s particular empathetic skills, it’s what you see here and what you remember that is of importance to us today.”

“What do you need to know?” It’s hard to keep her voice steady when she talks to him. Hard to keep the suspicion from her gaze, but she manages. “I haven’t had any flashbacks or anything.”

“The way that your father attacked you and your mother was different than the attacks on the other girls. They were desperate. He knew that he was out of time. Someone told him that we were coming.”

“You mean the person who called?”

“Do you know who it was?”

Don’t look at Dr. Lecter. Don’t look at Dr. Lecter. Don’t –

“No.” Abigail shakes her head then reaches up to straighten her scarf just to give her hands something to do. “It said the number was blocked and I’d never heard their voice before.”

“Well, was there anyone new in your father’s life?” Dr. Bloom’s voice is that awkward kind of gentle, like the way she’d call to a feral kitten. “Someone that you met or who he talked about?”

Abigail shakes her head. “No. I don’t think so. He never worked at the same job site twice, so he had a lot of new co-workers all the time, but he didn’t talk much about them. What I don’t get is… why would someone call to warn him?”

She does look at Dr. Lecter then. Watches his face to see if he’ll give anything away. Her dad would, sometimes, when mom would suddenly ask how his last hunt went. His face would change just enough for Abigail to know.

Dr. Lecter’s doesn’t, not even as Dr. Bloom answers her. “It’s possible that he was contacted by another killer. Someone who knew what he was doing. Or someone who had been helping him kill.”

There’s that cold feeling again. Like ice water has just been injected into her veins. “Like an accomplice?”

“Exactly.”

She can’t suppress her shiver this time. Accomplice… is that what she is? Is that what she did? She didn’t kill any of those girls. She never even saw them again after the first time. She didn’t help him hurt them. She just talked to them. That’s all she did. She just…

“Can we take a break?” She asks, her voice sounding strange to her own ears. “I… I think I need a break.”

(***)

“I knew that this was too much for her.” Alana murmurs, her voice too soft to carry over to Abigail where she’s sitting on the couch, holding a decorative pillow in her lap and absently tracing the pattern of it. “We should leave before this gets any harder on her. I don’t see this as a breakthrough, but at least it hasn’t caused a breakdown. Let’s keep it that way.”

Her gaze grows a little reproachful as she turns to Will, who barely resists the urge to roll his eyes. As if every tsk and tut under breath every time he answered one of Abigail’s questions wasn’t enough… he didn’t need her to try to pin him down with shame under one of her pointed glares too.

“She’s made peace with their deaths,” Hannibal says, saving Will from another pointless argument with Alana. “It’s the way her father lived that she’s struggling to reconcile with the man that she knew. She’ll be mourning her memories, which is no less painful.”

“I’m kind of glad she didn’t remember anything,” Alana says, her voice softening for Hannibal. “If she has nothing left to give to this place or the investigation, then Jack will have to look elsewhere, and she can move on.”

“Easier said than done.” Will mutters. “Jack hasn’t exactly taken his teeth out of my ankle yet.”

“He will or he’ll have them forcibly removed. Once Agent Crawford no longer has plausible cause to investigate Abigail, I’ll be sure to have him kept at a suitable distance from both your lives. I…” Hannibal trails off as his phone starts to vibrate. “Ah, it never fails. Would you please excuse me? I believe this is my lawyer. He was meant to phone me once he found out how it was that Freddie Lounds got into Abigail’s hospital room. I’ll take this in the kitchen. Excuse me.”

Oh, god.

It takes everything that Will has left to stop from begging Hannibal not to leave him alone with Alana. As it is, he does shout it in his mind with the hope that Hannibal has recently learned telepathy… but no such luck.

“Will,” Alana says, her voice pointed as soon as Hannibal is out of earshot and not able to deflect the argument for him. “I just want to say… I know that Abigail said that she appreciates you being honest with her, but there is such thing as too much information.”

“Alana,” Will matches her tone perfectly, straightening his shoulders so that he can look down his nose at her and give her a taste of her own self-righteous medicine. Be her long enough to make a *point*. “I just want to say… I know that you’re trying to prove yourself as a competent therapist after what happened between you and I, but there is such a thing as being out of your depth.”

“Oh, don’t do that. Don’t reflect me at myself.” Alana’s cheeks splotch red with embarrassment. “I’m not being unreasonable, here, Will. She’s only seventeen and she’s been through a lot. I’m not suggesting a full baby proofing, but you might just try to…cushion things. Maybe be a little less blunt.”

“She was betrayed by the two people in her life who she trusted the most,” Will relaxes his stance, letting the taste of Alana’s emotions bleed back out of him. “She was let down. Failed by her parents who didn’t protect her. Failed by everyone around her who missed the signs. Failed by the system that’s built up just high enough for her to take the fall and there’s nothing she can do about any of it. The only thing she can do is look for answers and I’ll give them to her if I can. If she has a problem with them, then I’m sure she’ll stop asking.”

“Will?”

As if on cue, Abigail calls out to him. Her voice no longer shakes but her fingers are digging tightly into the pillow and she looks exhausted, the dark shadows under her eyes looking harsher than they had before.

Relieved to have a reason to keep peeling the tape off his reluctant allyship with Alana, Will mutters a quiet “excuse me” and steps away, going to hover by the couch.

“You okay?”

“I was just wondering…can people be born sick or does something have to make them that way?”

“I know you want to understand why your father did what he did, but you’re not going to find the answers that you’re looking for about him after one morning back home.”

Abigail shakes her head. “I wasn’t talking about him. I… he didn’t seem sick, you know? He was really put together. Mom used to get mad at him because he was such a perfectionist that it would take forever to do things. Even just get a family picture at the beach. She’d call him a control freak, but I guess that’s what made him seem so reliable. You know, after he skinned a deer, he would pluck the loose hair. Most people use a torch. But my dad would remove all the hair by hand. He wanted to make sure he got every one of them. And he always would, no matter how long it took.”

“That just made him a better killer,” Will looks down at the pillow in her hands, staring at the stitched pattern of a deer waking through woods so that he doesn’t have to see the ghostly image of Garrett Jacob Hobbs slashing at his daughter’s throat, keeping perfect rhythm even as Will *shot* him. “He left almost no evidence. He didn’t become someone else when he did what he did. He was still himself. And that’s going to be the hardest part for you to accept.”

“It’s not just hard. It’s impossible.” Abigail’s fingers knuckles are bloodless as she squeezes the pillow in her lap. “He wasn’t crazy most of the time. He was just a normal dad. Always doing DIY projects or dancing with my mom to Elvis songs. It was only with me that he…”

Her lips tremble and she looks up at Will.

“Can there… can something be wrong with a person that makes other people act crazy? Did he have evil in him that I brought out or did I just make him evil in the first place?”

“Abigail…”

Will doesn’t realize that Alana’s crept closer until she’s right there, sitting down onto the couch next to her and placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“This wasn’t your fault. You’re just as much a victim of what he’s done as the other girls are.”

“But I’m still alive.” Abigail swallows hard, misery carved into her expression and Will’s heart *aches* in an echo of it. “And you’re not even going to find the pieces of the other girls.”

That catches Will off guard. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he’d use every part of them. When he taught me how to hunt, he said that we had to use every part of the deer otherwise it was just murder.” A hollow sound vibrates from her throat, and it takes Will a second to realize that Abigail is *laughing*. It’s a small, bitter sound that chatters through her teeth. “He was really dedicated to not wasting anything. He made his own plumbers’ putty and glue. He churned our butter himself. He’d carve knives out of leg bones and make… pillows…”

She trails off suddenly, looking down at the one in her grasp. Horror dawns slowly across her expression and she stands so suddenly that she nearly knocks Alana over.

“Abigail?”

She doesn’t answer. Will darts after her, vaguely aware that Alana is close behind, following her as she goes to the living room mantel and opens up what looks like a jewelry box.

From the bottom drawer she pulls out a small, handmade knife and for a brief and terrifying moment, Will is afraid that she’s going to try to hurt herself.

But she doesn’t. She stabs it into the pillow, instead. Rips the blade along the seams and then tears the fabric open wider with her free hand, digging into it with a tense but dazed expression. She grasps a fistful of stuffing and pulls it out.

…No.

Not stuffing.

Abigail’s face is as pale as it was the morning that her father tried to kill her as she holds up a wad of dark human hair, letting the pillow fall the floor, holding pieces of dead girls in both of her fists as her eyes start to well up with tears.

Will barely hears Alana’s gasp of disgust as he moves forward entirely on instinct.

“Abigail.” He says her name slowly but urgently. “Give me the knife, okay?

Her hand trembles but her grip on it doesn't loosen.

"Come on," Will says again, reaching out to grasp the blade of it since she's got the entire handle in her fist. "Let go."

Her grip slackens just enough for him to ease it from between her stiff fingers and he quickly pockets it before brushing the fistful of human hair from her grasp, next.

"Abigail, we're going to go outside now. Why don't we do that, huh? Let's just get out of here."

"I did this." Abigail whispers.

"What? No, sweetheart, you didn't." Alana finally seems to recover from her own shock, coming to Will's aid. "This isn't your fault, remember? We talked about this. You are just as innocent as these girls. Okay? Will's right. We should all go outside."

Abigail doesn't seem to hear her. Just shakes her head, a low whine of hysteria building up in her throat. "I did this. He told me that he had to kill them so he wouldn't kill me. And I let him. I let him do it. I *helped* him."

Alana rips her hands back away from Abigail as though she's been burned, clapping them over her mouth and barely muffling her squeak of horror.

"He didn't want to hurt me. He didn't. He loved me and I brought this out of him."

"Abigail, stop talking." Alana drops her hands back down from her mouth, her voice hoarse. "Don't say anything else."

"I didn't want to die. I was so scared. So I talked to them. I learned where they were going. I helped him so he wouldn't hurt me." Tears spill down her cheeks and Will can feel the sting of them in his own eyes, his mind and heart racing. "I'm a monster."

"Abigail, stop."

Will grabs her by her shoulders, crouching just enough to be at eye level with her.

"Listen to me. Okay? You're not a monster. It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay."

"I'm sorry," Abigail sobs and crumples into him, leaning forward and burying her face into his shirt, crying freely now. "I'm so sorry."

Will doesn't know who she's apologizing to. Him, Alana, of the scattered pieces of dead girls that are left on her living room floor. Maybe all of them. Maybe none. He wraps her arms around her just the same and lets her cry into his shirt, craning his head to get a look at Alana.

"This doesn't leave this room," he says. "This conversation didn't happen."

"Will…"

There's that look in her eye. That goddamn self-righteous, judge and jury look that she gets and Will's legs tense.

"We have to tell Jack."

He knew she was going to say it but it still hits him like a right hook from a prized fighter. "No, we really don't. And we're not going to."

"This isn't up for negation."

She's right, for once. It's not. Will gently steps away from Abigail just enough to usher her behind him, like he can protect her from Alana's sense of right and wrong just by standing between them.

"This doesn't change anything, Alana. You didn't think she deserved to be punished for what her father did just a minute ago. This is still what he did. What he made her do."

"I don't like this anymore than you do, but we have to tell Jack. He needs to know. This needs to be dealt with. Abigail, look at me. I want to help you. I do. But you need to step away from Will now, because he's not thinking clearly."

"I'm the one not thinking clearly?"

Will takes a step forward, his hands still held behind him, ready to push Abigail back if she tries to give into Alana's bullshit version of justice.

"Do you know that Jack will do to her? What the families of these missing girls will do? They already want their pound of flesh and all they have to go on is speculation. They're not just going to give her a slap on the wrist and some community service. This will haunt her for the rest of her life."

"The deaths of their daughters will haunt the families for the rest of their lives!" Alana's eyes flash. "Don't you think they deserve justice? I don't want to see Abigail hurt either, but she's young. She'll pay her debt to society and then she'll have the rest of her life ahead of her."

"The rest of her life? Yeah, of course. The rest of her life to be branded as a murderer. A cannibal. The rest of her life to be stalked by reporters, harassed by people like Lounds. To lose everything she has left."

Will fees sick, like the room is spinning, but he can see Alana in perfect clarity. The resolve in her eyes, the righteous fury in her expression. Nothing says that she's going to give in to his reasoning and he tosses a desperate glance back at Abigail, who stands shell-shocked with shaking hands.

And when she meets his gaze, he doesn't have to wade into that river of her emotions. He recognizes what's already there. He tastes the same fear in mouth that he'd choked on the day that Matthew stood over him, poised and ready to end his life. He knows that desperation to be saved. Guilt drove her to speak, but she doesn't want to suffer anymore because of her father.

Will looks away. Back at Alana.

“Don’t do this.” Will barely recognizes his voice as he pleads with her. “You don’t have to. You can’t just turn your back on her, Alana. She doesn’t have anyone else but us. We can protect her. You, me, and Hannibal. Her life doesn’t have to end.”

“Will…”

The note of finality in the way that she says his name is thunderous. She might as well have shouted it at him.

“I can’t just pretend not to see evil like you can.” She looks tired, like this conversation has taken everything out of her. “And you know what the right thing to do is just as much as I do.”

The right thing?

Ha. The right thing.

It’s always the right thing with her. Tell Jack about the monsters and he’ll come in and take care of them. No margins for error. No grey areas in her perfect black and white world.

The knife that he had taken from Abigail is suddenly in his hand. He doesn’t remember taking it out of his pocket, but there it is. The blade glints with reflected light.

“Will?”

Alana suddenly sounds frightened.

“What are you doing?”

He doesn’t have to think about it. The answer is already there on his lips, as if he’d somehow always known that it was going to come to this. “The right thing.”

Alana bolts, but Will is faster. He grabs her by a fistful of her dark hair and yanks her head back so hard that he hears a joint crack in protest.

“Will, don’t!”

Her scream comes seconds too late. Will’s hand is already swinging downward and the blade rips through the soft spot above her collarbone. He sinks it down to the hilt and then yanks it back out again. Blood sprays, a crimson constellation speckling his face and he stabs the blade back into her again, knocking them both to the floor with the momentum of his second swing.

He doesn’t feel the pain of landing on top of her.

He doesn’t feel the heat of blood soaking into his clothes.

He doesn’t feel anything at all but the smooth hit of the knife and the firm resistance of Alana’s skin as he stabs her repeatedly. A third time, a fourth. A fifth…

Someone catches his wrist.

The knife stops inches from Alana’s mutilated chest and Will looks up to see Hannibal standing over him.

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice is as gentle as his touch. “That’s enough. Let go of the knife.”

Will does. It slips from his numb fingers and bounces off Alana’s blood slick collarbone, clattering to the floor. The strange ringing in his ears that had started the moment he first ripped into her skin stops, leaving nothing but horrible silence.

He can feel it now. The pain of exertion, the sting of the scratches that run up the lengths of his arms; Alana’s desperate attempts to get him off her. The heaviness wetness of the blood that’s soaked into his clothes.

And the abject horror of what he’s just done.

“Hannibal?”

“Shh.” Hannibal takes his other hand into his and pulls him up off the body. “It’s alright, Mylimasis.”

“I killed her.” The words taste like ichor and he almost gags on them. “Hannibal, I killed her.”

“You did beautifully to protect our family.” Hannibal’s lips are his forehead. His lips must get coated in blood, but he doesn’t seem to notice or care. “So beautiful, Mylimasis.”

“Abigail?” Will’s head is spinning but not in any direction where she is, so he twists in Hannibal’s hold. “Oh, god. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, Will. Everything is fine.” He coaxes Will to look back at him and kisses him on the mouth this time. One of their tongues tastes like Alana’s blood. He’s not sure which. “You’ve done so well. You can rest now. I’ll take care of everything else.”

Chapter End Notes

Contrary to the song, Will did decide.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal stares dispassionately down at Alana as he cups the back of Will's head and tucks him carefully against his own body. Will's kill had been neither quick nor clean, but it was certainly beautiful. And could have been no more poignant if Will had rested a gavel from Alana's grip and beaten her to death with her own judgement.

Will presses his forehead down against Hannibal's shoulder and clutches at his shirt with bloodied, trembling hands as he begins to *sob*, ragged gasps tearing through his chest and causing his teeth to chatter. Hannibal can feel the tears soaking through his shirt, tears of horror and tears of relief.

Catharsis at last.

This wasn't the way that Hannibal would have set the stage for Will's first kill. Not when there were so many variables that he couldn't control – the neighbors, the mess, the difficulty of transporting a body without being seen – and so little privacy.

And yet, despite how many things here were not as Hannibal would have liked them, the way that Will's shoulders shake with the force of his cries tells him that this is exactly how it must be. Not with a gavel, but with a knife crafted by Garrett Jacob Hobbs' own hand. Not with judgement but with *freedom*.

The scar that Alana had carved into Will with the cut of her betrayal, the one that the one that she kept digging her greedy, underserving fingers in a desperate attempt to create enough damage for her to soothe back over for him to forgive her, would finally be allowed to fade and all that Alana had left of value to offer to Will has been spent. Now, all that's left is the disposal.

And, of course, Abigail.

"He killed her." Abigail's face is nearly as bloodless as Alana's is, but she stands on steady feet and stares unflinchingly at the corpse on the foor. Every bit her father's daughter, even when the blood that's been spilt isn't meant to nurse her. "He… oh, god, he really killed her."

"Yes." Hannibal agrees. "He did."

Will's eyes have gone curiously blank, Hannibal notes, when he begins the unpleasant process of relinquishing his hold on him. Glazed over and distant, he's looking far behind this room and into something only he can see. A memory palace of his own, perhaps, that calls him home to Louisiana. Or one of those clever forts that he constructs over every unpleasant feeling he takes into himself.

As much as it pains him, Hannibal must allow him to stay wherever he has run to. Coaxing him back would only impede the process of damage control.

“Abigail, would you be so kind as to draw the blinds?” Hannibal asks, his voice steady and deceptively calm as scoops Will up into his arms, lifting him with ease and cradling him against his chest. “It would be inopportune if one of your neighbors were to suddenly become interested in our affairs.”

Abigail doesn’t answer, but her gaze shifts to the direction of the front door and back again, her tongue darting out to wet her lips and her brow furrowing.

“I am much faster than you, Abigail.” Hannibal says, his tone still conversational. “You would never make it to the door. And I would be quite irritated.”

“I’m not going to run.” She bristles at the implication of his unspoken threat and juts her chin out defiantly. There’s not nearly so much opposition in her eyes as there is in her posture, however. “I never did before.”

“Brave girl.” Hannibal means that. “But I need you to be more than that, now. I need you to be clever too. Clever enough to do what I tell you. Close the blinds.”

There’s no further resistance. She crosses the room in three large bounds, carefully stepping over the blood that’s still slowly spreading across the floor, and draws the curtains shut with a flick of her wrist.

“Thank you. Now –“

“We have to tell them that I did it.” Abigail interrupts as she turns back to face Hannibal. “tell them that I freaked out, being back here. That I lost control or something.”

“Do we?” Hannibal regards her with curiosity. “This isn’t a case of self-defense, Abigail. Alana has been butchered. You would be imprisoned.”

“Better me than him.” Her lips tremble but her voice never wavers. “He killed her. But he did it for me. Because he didn’t want Dr. Bloom to give Agent Crawford a reason to hurt me. She was going to turn me in because I…”

She swallows hard before spitting the words out like they taste of poison. “I helped my dad.”

Hannibal regards her calmly. “I know.”

His simple admission takes some of the wind out of her sails; she visibly deflates. “You heard?”

Hannibal only gazes steadily at her. “Go to your parents’ room and find something of your fathers that Will can wear. His clothes are beyond salvaging, I’m afraid. You may leave them outside of the guest bathroom. Then I would like you to collect a mop, a bucket, and your strongest household cleaners. Bleach would be preferable.”

“You want me to clean up the blood?” For the first time since Hannibal entered the room, Abigail looks disturbed.

“You will help me clean it, once I’ve cleaned up Will.”

“You’re going to try to get rid of the body?” Abigail’s teeth worry over her bottom lip. Scraping against the skin. “I mean… we’re going to try to get rid of it?”

“The clothing, Abigail.” Hannibal turns away from her, offering nothing else as an answer to her questions. “Time is of the essence.”

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The Hobbs’ guest bathroom is small but serviceable, sporting a small porcelain tub and a collection of matching towels sitting neatly folded on the shelf beside it. Satisfied with these meager amenities, Hannibal sets Will back down onto his own two feet and begins the process of stripping him of his soiled clothing.

Will doesn’t so much as blink as Hannibal divests him of his clothes. His eyes remain glassy and unaware even as he’s lifted back up and set gently down onto the bathroom counter. Allowing Hannibal to control and manipulate him like a doll. No resistance and no half-hearted complaints or affirmations of personal ability.

Hannibal can’t stand it. “Will?”

He doesn’t move. His eyelids don’t flicker.

“Mylimasis?”

No response.

Hannibal brushes his fingertips against Will’s cheek, seeking small comfort in his solidity even as some desperate, starving part of him longs to find a way inside to the place where he has retreated and swallow him whole. Keep him closer than close so that he can’t slip away from Hannibal again and Will gives him *nothing* in return.

Sighing with resignation, Hannibal turns his attention to the bath. Rolling his sleeves up, he turns the knobs until he’s satisfied with the temperature of the water that flows and pulls the stopper on the drain so that the tub can begin to fill and rises again, carrying Will from the counter and submerging him gently into the water, watching as a pink film begins to bloom.

Hannibal grabs a bottle of generic body wash from its place on the shelf and squeezing a generous portion into his palms, beginning the process of scrubbing away the blood on Will's chest.

"I understand that you are struggling to accept the horror of your actions," Hannibal informs him, his voice equal parts gentle and matter of fact. "What you've done is not an action to be taken lightly. But it is that action that will buy Abigail's freedom and ensure her safety. You should be quite pleased with yourself for that. I know I am."

"…There's blood in your approval." Will's voice is strange and strained. But he speaks and Hannibal is pleased to hear his voice. "You're happy that she's dead."

"I see no point in mourning someone who merely suffered the consequences of their actions."

"What about my actions?"

Will's eyes are disturbingly empty when he tilts his head up and meets Hannibal's gaze. But at least they see him and not the space beyond this place.

"There will be consequences," Hannibal moves his hands from Will's chest to his throat, scraping away the blood there with the pad of his thumb. "A reaction for every action, Will. But that doesn't necessarily promise pain. Abigail's safety is a consequence of what you have done. As is her fear of what will happen next."

Will shrinks into himself at the mention of Abigail possibly being *afraid*, making Hannibal suspect that he had been too deep into his own mind to have understood the conversation that had been held in his presence not long before.

"She must be so scared," Will whispers, the words rough with barely suppressed emotion. "I'm no better than her father."

Hannibal's hands still against his shoulders. "She is frightened, yes, but not of you. She's frightened by the prospect of seeing you punished. Of enduring your abandonment. Are you going to leave her, now, Will?"

"Am I going to leave you, you mean?"

"I am already certain of your position in my life, Will. No matter what choices you make next or what you think must happen, you will be at my side where you belong."

Will looks back down at his lap. "…She was your friend. Your colleague. Why aren't you upset?"

Hannibal's hands move to Will's arms, next. Scrubbing away blood and frowning at the livid scratches that he finds underneath. Alana had not submitted quietly to her fate as decided by Will – even in her final moment, she had no greater appreciation for beauty. No understanding of devotion.

"She was a threat," Hannibal chooses to answer honestly. Will deserves as much. "And a very poor therapist. Abigail's safety and well-being meant nothing to her; she chose the comfort of

relying on her textbook morality to navigate a difficult situation rather than opening her eyes to the complex truths of life."

"You heard her threatening to turn Abigail in."

"Yes."

Will's lips tremble around his next accusation. "Why didn't you do anything? Stop her? Stop *me*. Did you watch me kill her?"

"I did." Hannibal cups Will's chin in his hands, coaxing him to meet his gaze. "It was beautiful."

It doesn't surprise him when Will flinches away. Nor does the horror in his gaze bother him. Not when he can see the desperate yearning beyond that; the desire for approval burning brightly within him.

"How can you say that?" Will pushes back until he's bunched up in the corner of the tub, but it doesn't create nearly as much space between them as he seems to desire. "I'm a murderer, Hannibal. I killed her. This – this isn't some psychosexual fantasy about control or dominance or whatever it is that you're into. Alana Bloom is dead because of what I did. What could possibly be beautiful about that?"

"God kills indiscriminately and yet we gaze upon his works with reverence and the silent agreement that he knows what is best, even if we do not."

"I'm not God."

"True. I find you far more tolerable." Hannibal grasps Will's leg under the water, dragging him closer again so that he can resume the process of washing the blood from him. "Indulge me in a hypothetical?"

Will only stares at him, so Hannibal speaks on the assumption of acceptance.

"Pretend, for a moment, that when we walk back out of this room, we will find Alana Bloom alive and well. That Abigail will reveal her secret, again, and that Alana will threaten to go to Jack as she had before." Hannibal wipes his thumb against Will's face, clearing away a smudge of crimson. "What would you do differently? What choices do you have?"

Will tilts his head away with a frown, anger creasing the corners of his eyes. But it's the silence itself that's telling. He has no answer to give because there was only one possible solution.

"…God kills indiscriminately," Will murmurs, finally. "But I made a choice. There's nothing to revere about that."

"We will have to agree to disagree for the moment."

There is so much else that Hannibal wants to say; so much that he has to offer to Will, now. But no time for any of it. And now that Will's skin is clean from all traces of Alana, save for

the scratches she left against his skin (blasphemous), it's time to remove the rest of Alana too.

"Abigail should have left some clothes for you outside the door. I'll be just a moment."

Hannibal begins to try to stand but Will's hand shoots out and grabs onto his wrist. Clutching as tightly to him as a drowning man to a lifeline.

"They're going to take me back to the BSHCI." He says, his voice remarkably toneless given the terror in his eyes. "Just… don't let them hurt Abby. And please don't give away Harley and Winston. They don't deserve that."

Something in Hannibal's chest twinges at the way that Will begs for the lives and safety of others, but never for his own and a flicker of rage burns through him at the thought of Jack Crawford coming to collect Will a second time.

"You are staying with me." Hannibal says, firmly. He reaches down to cup the side of Will's face, pleased when his boy unconsciously nuzzles his cheek against his palm. "Anyone foolish enough to attempt to take you from me will fare no better than Dr. Bloom. And I am not nearly so kind as you. Now, please. Stay here. I'll be only a moment."

(***)

Her father must have been some kind of superman, Abigail thinks, as she peels yet another soiled pad off the bottom of her mother's Swiffer Wet-Jet and tosses it into to the garbage bag that she'd set up near Dr. Bloom's body.

Her arms are starting to ache from the effort of scrubbing the floor and the air smells like blood *and* lavender now. But there's no real progress for her to speak of. The more she cleans, the more blood seems to just ooze out of Dr. Bloom's body and take the place of what she had just erased. It's hard to imagine that it'll ever end… even harder to imagine how her father had done this, repeatedly. Always cleaning up after corpses and never leaving any evidence of what he'd been doing.

Maybe cleaning, like murder, is something you're born with a penchant for. Abigail wonders if that can skip a generation.

And then nearly jumps out of her skin at the sound of –

"Abigail?"

A scream catches in her throat, coming out like the strangled mew of a sickly kitten, and she whirls around to see Dr. Lecter standing in the doorway to the living room.

"Jeez!" Abigail drops her hand from her throat and lets it fall to rest over her heart, instead, feeling the way that it pounds against her ribcage like a jackhammer into concrete. "Who sneaks up on someone cleaning up after a murder?"

Dr. Lecter gives her one of his odd looks. His lips quirk into a smile but there's always something in his eyes that seems to fall just short of amused. If she had ever been forced to stand in front of a line up made of her father, Will Graham, and Dr. Lecter and told to pick the serial killer, she would have pointed at him without a second thought.

(Funny that he's the only one who hasn't killed for her yet.)

"My apologies," Lecter says, without sounding sorry at all. "I didn't realize I was… sneaking."

"It's fine." Abigail forces her hand not to shake as she brushes her hair back from her face, urging herself to stand a little taller. A little more confidently, with squared shoulders and an unwavering gaze. Because fear was always what made her father the most blood thirsty – her own or his victims – and she knows a predator when it's standing in her living room. "How's Will?"

"Getting dressed. He should be here in a moment, so I would like to remove the body before that."

The body.

It's weird how casually he can say that. Almost as weird as how casually Abigail can be standing next to it, mop in hand, thinking about how her father did things like *this* every week with the same ease that other people's dads went golfing.

"Right." No fear. No fear at all. "How do we…?"

"Not we." Dr. Lecter smiles again. "Though I appreciate your dedication to teamwork. I will take care of this part. There is something else that I need you to do."

"If it's to apply to colleges so that you can hunt girls who attend the same orientations, that trick is a little worn out."

It's not a funny joke and leaves her mouth feebly. But it feels better than saying nothing; better than admitting to the reality of going through this *again*.

"Not this time."

Dr. Lecter humours her total lack thereof and holds something out to her. Abigail holds out her hand automatically, blinking slowly with confusion when she realizes that it's a Ziplock bag. Snack sized and… empty?

"…I don't get it."

"You've already expressed your desire that Will not suffer for his actions against Dr. Bloom, yes?"

Abigail swallows thickly, still confused. "Yeah."

“And I’ve expressed my and Will’s mutual desire to see that you are kept safe and not punished by Jack Crawford for what your father has done?”

Abigail feels like a bigger idiot by the second, just staring at him and waiting for the part where something clicks.

“Then, there is only the third option.”

Dr. Lecter reaches out and taps his index finger against the outside of the bag. It shifts and catches the light and Abigail realizes that it’s not empty. She can see it, now. A few long, red hairs.

“We place the blame elsewhere. And onto someone who deserves a little suffering.”

Chapter End Notes

I was fighting for my life against this chapter. It's shorter than I planned because it was either post it as is or start a new life in Aruba under an assumed name and never look back.

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's an orchestra performing in Will's head and the only song they know is *pain*.

There's no rhythm to it. No rhyme or reason; just a maddening cacophony of searing pressure that pounds inside of his skull like a hammer to a nail. White-hot and all encompassing, even the drag of his eyelids as he tries to open them is intolerable and he nearly gags from the agony, writhing against the heavy weight of something pressing down on him.

With no sense of time or self, and the choking feeling of being compressed by an endless sea, he can only exist on instinct. Every draw of air that burns into his lungs and every jerk of his body is out of his control; urged on by a gut-deep feeling of wrongness that sends the autopilot part of his brain screaming into panic without knowing WHY or WHERE it was coming from.

Wincing still at the nauseating scrape of skin against dry eyes, he manages to kick off some of the oppressive weight and scrambles to free himself from what remains, half-nonsensical impressions of being caught in a spider's web flooding his mind. A hand touches his face, and it takes thirty seconds to realize that it belongs to him. Blinking tears from his eyes, he flexes his fingers experimentally and smacks his lips against the sour taste of dehydration.

This is my hand, Will thinks, waving it in front of his face. *All my fingers are still there and that's a good thing.*

Having a hand feels like more of a marvel than it should have been and Will gingerly presses his palm against the mattress - yes, mattress, that's what he's lying on - and tries to sit up. His wrist pops in protest under the pressure of propping up all his weight and he manages to find his other hand in time to get himself most of the way upright. Neither his back nor his head appreciate the new position, but the weight that had been pressing down on his chest falls further away and the screaming sense of 'danger' follows it. He reaches out blindly, trying to feel for what had been threatening to crush him, but his fingertips only encounter soft fabric.

A blanket?

He'd been fighting for his life against a duvet.

Equal parts perplexed and embarrassed, Will swings his legs around so that he's sitting on the edge of the bed and rubs at his face with both hands, trying to scrub away the sticky film of sleep from his skin with friction alone as reality crashes over him in a cold wave, flooding him with memories. Abigail's confession, Alana's death, Hannibal's promise to take care of everything.

He drops his hands from his face in horror, gazing at his fingers as if expecting to find blood there; still hot, sticky, and coppery. But there's nothing. No traces of blood. His hands smell

clinically clean, like generic bathroom soap. Apart from scores of puckered pink where Alana had dug her nails into his skin, there's no evidence that last night had been anything but a terrible dream.

But why is he waking up alone?

"Hannibal?" Moving slowly, Will pushes himself to stand and stumbled forward from the bed to the door leading out into the main part of the hotel room. The cold metal of the handle is the first thing that feels *real,* and he thrusts the door open with a renewed sense of urgency, calling out again. "Hannibal?"

"Good morning, Will." Hannibal calls to him from the kitchenette, standing at the coffee pot and smiling pleasantly. "Excellent timing. I've just finished your breakfast."

Will's never heard a sentence that made less sense in all his life. "…Breakfast?"

He repeats the word as though he's only just hearing it for the first time, his teeth clicking together sharply on the "tuh" sound and making it sound even more foreign in his own voice. But Hannibal's pleasant smile doesn't waver.

"Liver on toast with spiced pecans and mint," Hannibal pours coffee into two mugs. "I was given permission to utilize the kitchens, here, in exchange for me teaching the chefs the recipe. Of course, the liver they use will be of poorer quality… but when you teach a man to fish, you cannot guarantee that he will learn taste as well. Why don't you take a seat?"

There's something wrong with the way that Hannibal is looking at him. The smile on his face and the warmth in his eyes are the wrong answers to a simple equation. But Will can't wrap his head around anything, least of all *math*, to figure out how it is that Hannibal should be looking at him. Disorientated and more than a little uneasy, he just… walks to the table on stiff legs and sinks into the nearest chair, staring ahead at the slants of gold that the morning sunlight creates by filtering gently through the blinds.

It's pretty… and somehow that feels wrong, too. Why is it pretty? Why is the sun shining at all? There should be grey clouds overhead, ominous peals of thunder and cracks of lightening. Everything should feel as ugly and out of control as he does on the inside.

Will jumps when Hannibal sets a plate down in front of him, then flinches again when a kiss is pressed to the top of his head. If Hannibal notices, he doesn't say. He only offers one of his thin, mysterious smiles and inclines his head to the plate of food in front of Will.

"It's best while still warm, Mylimasis."

Will starts to reach for his fork on instinct… and then stops as the answer to the equation hits him. "…Are we just not going to talk about it?"

Hannibal's response is immediate. "Talk about what, darling?"

Sincerity practically drips from his tone, as sweet and cold as condensation on a glass of iced tea. But he answered quickly. Too quickly, as far as Will's concerned.

“Last night,” Will presses, eyes intent on Hannibal’s calm expression. Studying him for any sign of displeasure. A droop in the corner of his mouth, tightness in the corners of his eyes, a twitch of his nose… something, anything that would give him away. “Are we just not going to talk about last night?”

Irritation prickles under Will’s skin as Hannibal seems to deliberately turn away from him to finish preparing the coffee he had poured. A splash of fresh cream, a few spoonsfuls of sugar in each mug… and still no answers. He’s unreal where he stands. Not a trace of unease, no tension in his shoulders or nervous tapping of his fingers.

It’s only Will’s memories of bloodshed and murmured promises of safety that keep him from falling for that picture-perfect early morning dishevelment that Hannibal offers. His sleep tousled hair and bare chest softens the lines of him, makes him almost *touchable*, and Will has never resented it more than he does now because he knows it has to be fake. A facade; an *act.* But even knowing so doesn’t take the authenticity out of Hannibal’s gait when he approaches the table and sets a mug of coffee in front of Will’s plate. Doesn’t weaken the charm of the way that Hannibal draws the only other available chair closer to Will’s and sits down next to him so closely that their knees touch under the table.

Hannibal is camouflaged in lies. They’re tailored to him as faultlessly precise as any of the suits he wears. And for the first time in Will’s life, he looks into the eyes of someone and doesn’t feel anything but his own confusion shining back at him.

“I didn’t realize you’d be so upset,” Hannibal says, picking up Will’s fork and cutting into Will’s toast for him, scooping up a forkful of bread and liver and gently blowing on it before he holds it up to Will’s mouth. “No one minded you falling asleep in the car, Mylimasis. It was a long day. Both Abigail and Alana bid me to give you their best.”

Will, who had instinctively opened his mouth for the bite of food, nearly chokes on it now. Barely managing to swallow it down before a heaving cough in his chest can make him spit it back out onto the plate, Will jumps to his feet. His chair topples to the floor with a clatter, and he swats at Hannibal’s hand when he tries to reach for him.

“Don’t.” He hisses through gritted teeth. “Don’t touch me. Don’t you dare touch me if you’re going to sit there and lie to me.”

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice softens, but it doesn’t feel gentle. It feels like a warning. “Calm down.”

“You know what’s never worked to make someone calm in the history of ever? Telling them to calm down.” Will snaps, twisting up his mouth and then aiming a kick at his overturned chair. It hurts but it’s a release of pent-up energy and even the pain is better than the confusion. “Just stop. Stop acting like everything is okay. I killed Alana last night. I killed her.”

Hannibal sets the fork back down onto the table with exaggerated calm and gets to his feet as well. “No, Will. You did not.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Turning away from Hannibal, Will rakes his fingers through his hair and shakes his head. He’s lying. He’s lying. He’s lying. Will doesn’t understand why or to what end, but he knows Hannibal is lying. Even if it doesn’t sound like he is. Even if he doesn’t look like he is. It’s all lie. Maybe everything has been. “I did it. I killed her. I remember killing her. I stabbed her. Repeatedly.”

“Will, you are not making any sense right now. Perhaps you had a nightmare.”

“Are you telling me that Alana Bloom, at this moment, is not dead?”

“I cannot vouch for the state of Dr. Bloom in this moment, Will. I can only tell you that when I last saw her, she was alive and well. We drove her to the motel where she has been staying before we returned Abigail to the hospital. Of that, Abigail can also attest. You had fallen asleep, darling, which is why you don’t remember.”

Will tears his gaze from Hannibal, from the gentle bewilderment in his gaze and the confused frown on his lips. He stares into the kitchenette, instead, and then further beyond that. To the Hobbs’ living room. It felt so real, even now, the smooth hilt of the knife in his hand and the grinding sound of a blade through bone.

Stabbing into her over and over again, driving that knife into her chest and her throat in a frenzy to stop her from ruining everything with her poisonous words and her soft, sad looks that begged for forgiveness even as she betrayed him once more. It happened. He knows that it did. This isn’t like before, where black holes in his memory seemed to eat up everything that he thought he knew about himself, and an illness festered and consumed him until there was nothing left of whoever he had been.

He’s not sick and he’s not crazy. Not like this.

“My name is Will Graham,” he murmurs. The phrase stabs into his mouth like a shard of a memory stuck in his teeth. “It’s nine thirty a.m. I’m at the Hotel Ivy in Minnesota with Dr. Hannibal Lecter and I murdered Alana Bloom last night.”

“…Did Alana teach you that?” Hannibal asks, unexpectedly. There’s a subtle shift in his tone. It sounds like recognition.

“When I first told her that I was having a hard time staying present in the moment.” Will confirms, stiffly.

“I used that method to help a patient who had been experiencing dissociative episodes while Alana was shadowing me.” Hannibal moves forward and takes one of Will’s hands in his own. “It’s an excellent way to ground yourself, but it only works if you’re certain of yourself, Will.”

“I am.”

Will tries to tug his hand away, but Hannibal is stronger. He doesn’t relinquish his hold.

“You should not be.” He says quietly, bringing the palm of Will’s hand up to his mouth and brushing a kiss against his skin. “We are sculptors, Will, every one of us. Our words and our actions are what shape the very form of our lives. We are not bound to any one path. Is this the road you would walk?”

“It’s the one that I’m on.” Will’s lips tremble. “Nothing changes what I did.”

“Unless of course, you did nothing.” Hannibal draws Will closer, kissing his wrist next. “Then there is no need for change. I understand that you are confused. That you are frightened. But you don’t need to be.”

“I don’t need to be? You’ve done nothing but lie to me since I woke up. What is there in all the world more worthy of fear than not being able to trust someone you love?”

For the first time since Will stumbled out of the bedroom, Hannibal tenses. And too late does Will realize his mistake — the words that he had used, the ones that he wasn’t ready to admit to himself, let alone say out loud. And the answer to his question is right there, in the silence that follows those words.

Rejection.

Rejection by someone you love is more worthy of fear than the loss of trust. And Will feels it now. Feels it as sharp and as cold as the knife that Matthew Brown had once thrust into his body. But this cut is deeper, to the very core of him. Will is the desperation of a wild creature caught in a trap. Every second that Hannibal doesn’t respond is another second of all-consuming panic.

“Let go of me.” Will mutters, tugging against Hannibal’s grip again. “Dr. Lecter. Let go.”

Hannibal’s grip only tightens at the informality. “How quickly you dismiss me. Do you love as God loves, Will? Unconditionally so long as there is unwavering obedience?”

“You asked for obedience, Hannibal. Not me.” Will closes his eyes and turns as far away from him as he’s able, unwilling to look at him anymore. Not while he’s lying. “I just wanted honesty.”

“I always tell the truth. In my own way.”

Will opens his mouth to reject that qualifier, but Hannibal continues speaking before he can.

“And, if you’ll recall, I never asked for your obedience, only your dependence. I wanted control of your life and all that you are. I decide who you are, what you are, and how you live.”

A renewed sense of heat floods through Will, but this time it’s not fury that prickles beneath his skin, but *arousal*. And he knows it’s just as apparent to Hannibal as it is to himself when Hannibal finally lets go of his wrist, but only to wrap that same hand around Will’s throat, instead. He doesn’t squeeze hard enough to restrict Will’s airway, but his bleat of surprise is still a chokes sound when Hannibal molds his body around Will’s. Caging him with his free

arm around Will's hips like a metal bar, locking him so that his back is pressed firmly to Hannibal's chest.

"All you are is what I say you are. There is no truth other than the one that I offer."

"…Control freak." Will murmurs, tilting his head back just enough to feel the back of his skull against Hannibal's shoulder. Seeking comfort and inviting him to get more of a grip of his throat. It's sick. It's wrong. But it feels better than confusion. Better than uncertainty. Better than *lies*. "Do *you* know as God knows, Hannibal? My thoughts, my urges, my nature… do you really think I'm your design?"

"I know better God." Hannibal's fingers splay out against Will's skin. Dig into his flesh and threaten to bruise. "God allows free-will. Choices. If you run from him, he won't follow. My Will is not free. My Will does not choose. If my Will runs, he is followed, captured, and brought back to where he belongs. I don't think you are my design, Will. I know it. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Will says, and he means it.

"Good. Then repeat after me: My name is Will Graham."

"…My name is Will Graham."

"It's nine forty-five a.m. I am at the Hotel Ivy in Minnesota." Hannibal's strokes his fingers against Will's throat. "And I did not kill Alana Bloom."

The words should taste like sacrilege. They should be heavy and bitter on his tongue. But they're not. He says them easily. "It's nine forty-five a.m. I'm at the Hotel Ivy in Minnesota… and I didn't kill Alana Bloom."

"There, now." Hannibal presses an open-mouthed kiss to the side of Will's throat before letting go of him. "Pick up your chair and then sit and finish your breakfast. I'll have to make you a new cup of coffee — I expect it is unsalvageable cold."

(***)

"Here she is."

Soft, sorrowful words, as unobtrusive as the slanting gold bars of the sunlight that filtered in through wooden blinds. Jack barely hears them over the buzz of his own thoughts; can hardly be bothered to meet Agent Bennet's gaze because looking at him and accepting the condolences that are there in his mournful expression is just as painful as trying to keep his eyes on the body that hangs before him, impaled on a rack of antlers. Her arms are arranged delicately, pulled away from her body and fastened in a faux-crucifixion and her hair fallen over her face in uneven lank straggles of black, obscuring most of her face and the bruising that traveled from her jaw down to her mutilated chest.

Jack looks and he waits. Waits for that head to lift and for her hair to fall away from her face. Waits for Alana Bloom to part her bloodless, chapped lips and offer him one last lecture. Condemn him on the spot for standing before her brutalized body and feeling nothing but relief. Sick, sweet, cooling relief that washes over him like a rain in the spring. Because Alana Bloom is the one that's dead — not Will Graham, like he had feared.

Standing to the left, Agent Bennet waits to be acknowledged. He's still young, Jack knows. They'd all been trained to care, to treat every victim as THE victim and fight for their right to justice. But that feeling had waned for Jack a long time ago. Stopping killers was all that mattered, all that he had been good at.

The bodies that piled up along the way were just… steppingstones to the answers that they needed. It's a feeling that claims everyone, eventually. It'll come for Bennet too, Jack thinks, as he finally meets the other agent's gaze. One day he'll stand before a grieving wife, a hurting mother, or the body of a victim and he'll stop seeing innocence wasted and start seeing breadcrumbs to the next twisted mind that they'll lock away.

But for now, Jack just presses his tongue against his teeth and forces himself to speak. "… Who found her?"

"Sheriff's deputy." Bennet says, looking relieved himself to be able to offer something more than half-hearted placations to a man who doesn't really want or need them. "Boys in blue are a little peeved that this has become a federal case. Lots of backlash in the paper against the local cops for not having an eye or a handle on Hobbs. It's hard to convince them that we're not here to usurp them, so we threw them a bone and said that we'd need them to keep the area secure for our final sweep this morning. We were just throwing them a bone. You know how important it is for local law enforcement to cooperate with us. But next thing we know, we're getting calls that there's another body, killed the same as the others had been. One of our agents recognized her or at least thought he did."

Jack knows what he should do here. Bow his head in mourning. Maybe make a show of anger and slam his fist into the wall. Promise the body of his fallen colleague that he'd do everything he could to make this right and get the son of a bitch who did this to her. But there's nothing for him to pull from to even fake the reaction. He's empty where that compassion should be. All that he can offer is procedure.

"I'll want to talk to the deputy," Jack says, looking back at Alana's corpse where it hangs on the wall. "Get his official statement and then compare it to the one that he gave you."

"Of course."

"There were a lot of prints downstairs. I'm guessing you had agents moving in and out of the cabin before I got here and I am hoping that you took record of any prints that were already there in case the killer left tracks. I am also assuming that your men did a thorough sweep of the area. I'll want a copy of any findings."

"I'll make sure you get them… but I wouldn't get your hopes up," Bennet toys with his tie nervously. "Based on what I was told, there wasn't much to find. It rained pretty hard last night — washed away any evidence. Of course, we won't know the approximate time of

death or display until our coroner has a look. But I wanted you to have the chance to identify the body sooner rather than later. You know how these things get tied up. Didn't want there to be any bad blood between us as we took things out of your hands."

Jack blinks. "Out of my hands?"

"Well…yeah. We'll keep you updated to the minute, of course, but this murder did happen out of your jurisdiction -"

"During a case that I am already working on," The anger that Jack hadn't been able to muster up before is suddenly blistering underneath his skin at the thought of being chased off this case over a technicality. "And to one of my agents. Bennet, I was specifically requested to work on the Shrike case and it's only in the interest of not creating waves that I have allowed you and your agents to join me in the investigation."

"The Shrike is dead." With a lot more bravery in his voice than there is on his face, Bennet begins to retort. "This is a completely new case. I mean, done by a copy-cat, sure, but the lines are clearly drawn here. You guys can head back to Virginia and focus on things there. Leave this to us."

"With all due respect, Agent Bennet, but I am the head of the BAU as located in the main office in Quantico. I have been solving cases since before you could hold your own head up. So when I say that not only do you lack the rank to chase me off of this case but the *experience* to handle it, then you should know it's not coming from a place of petty squabbling over jurisdiction. I am a man who could have your badge for breakfast if I wanted. And I just might, since you've already made a fatal error."

Jack studies Bennet's face intently, watching as indignation takes root even as he's cowed by the authority in Jack's tone.

"I don't see an error. Sir."

"Which only proves my point about your incompetence." Jack crosses his arms over his chest, eyes narrowed. "You've already decided that this case is not linked to the Shrike. How exactly have you concluded that this is the work of a copycat when we have not yet located the Shrike's partner? At best, you want control of this case. At worst, you're making assumptions without evidence. Either way, I suggest you abandon this quest to get rid of my team in the wake of one of *my* agents being killed and start getting on board with who's really in charge around here. Do I make myself clear?"

There's a second of hesitancy in Bennet's eyes, but the futility of his argument seems to win out over any stupidity left in him. "I…yes, sir."

"Good. Since you are so determined to be involved in this case, then you can escort Agents Katz, Price, and Zeller to the lab and relinquish all evidence and space to work to them. Then get me the number of whoever you report to so that I can talk them into finding you a case more suited to your abilities. Preferably something that you can't screw up."

If Bennet was any paler he'd become translucent. But as good as it felt to get some digs into him and vent some of the frustrations that Jack had been feeling, part of him wishes that Bennet would puff out his chest. That he'd fire back just to give Jack a reason to really unload on him.

But he doesn't. He just nods stiffly and makes a hasty retreat toward the stairs, practically tripping over the metaphorical tail that's between his legs as he goes. Leaving Jack alone.

He turns his head to look at the body, again, and smiles grimly. There's still no room for mourning. No space in him to feel this as a loss. Not when it shines as an opportunity. A bartering chip easily within reach.

If there is a hell, then Jack knows he'll go there. But not now. Not tomorrow. Not a second before he gets all his ducks in a row. Pulling out his phone, he punches in Dr. Lecter's number from memory and brings it up to his ear, listening to it ring.

Jack's really got him now.

There's no way that Will can walk away from this.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah Hannibal got the liver from where you think he did. Happy new year!

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hotel Ivy isn't exactly unwelcoming, but it isn't warm, either. A tall man with a condescending look about him stands behind the counter and stares at Jack with a gaze that clearly stated that he didn't think he belonged there. Even after calling up to the room that Lecter and Graham were staying in and being given the word that Jack was not only welcome, but expected by them, that moue of distaste remained on his face. The same look he'd been given last time, by another nameless worker with the same air of superiority about him.

And Jack might have smiled a little wider than necessary back at the man. Might have let his own eyes dance with the wordless equivalent of "I told you so" as he was given directions to the elevator that would take him up to the penthouse suite. And if his walk was a little more swagger than it was business, who was to say? Places like this had a habit of bringing the best of the worst in people – places like this didn't think that people like Jack deserved to be counted among its numbers. And there's a special kind of schadenfreude to put some extra pep in his step when he can pretend that he's not here for work alone.

Pep that he abandons the moment that he lifts his hand and raps on the door to Dr. Lecter's suite. Two quick knocks and he steps back, clasping his hands in front of him and forcing his expression to become something more appropriately mournful. To remember who he is, no matter where he is.

He has a well-rehearsed greeting on his tongue, ready to deliver the moment that Lecter opened the door… but it's not the good doctor that looks out at him.

It's Will.

"…Jack."

Graham's greeting is as stiff as his shoulders and as black as the circles under his eyes. The colour of his eyes is dulled with disinterest; that damned look he gives anyone and everyone who isn't some kind of serial killer with a mind he can crack open and excavate. It makes Jack want to bristle up in response; want to crack down on him and cow him into submission.

But he doesn't. He's not here to fight. Not yet. "Good morning, Will. Can I come in?"

"Hannibal seems to think so," is Will's cryptic response as he steps out of the way.

Jack doesn't have to be a nearly psychic empath to know that Graham's telling him, as directly as he can, that Jack wouldn't be in the same state as him if he had any choice in the matter. And a small, mean part of him wants to spit the news into his face right then and there. Wants to make him flinch a little – wants to see the Will Graham that needed Jack just

as much as Jack needed him. For intellectual stimulation, for money, for consistent work in spite of everything he lacks in social graces and economic standing.

The larger, more controlled part of Jack steps on that pettier version of him. Muffles it under the weight of a metaphorical shoe as he steps inside of the suite, keeping that a neutral expression on his face.

“Thank you,” Jack scans the surrounding area. “Dr. Lecter is still around, I hope?”

“Bedroom.”

Will shuts the door and trudges away from him, dropping down onto one of the overstuffed couches in the “sitting area” part of the suite and curls into himself. Long legs drawn in, knees pressing against his chest, and dark curls hanging in his eyes.

“Well, then I suppose we’ll just have to wait for him.” Jack sits on the couch opposite of him, smiling as politely as he can. “I was hoping to talk to the both of you.”

Will doesn’t answer, pointedly fixing his gaze on some point beyond Jack’s head. Staring through him rather than at him. As stubborn as he’s ever been. Jack’s never meant a larger pissant in all his life than he has in the version of Graham that lives like this; closed off from everything and everyone, staring anything that disrupts him down as if it’s somehow paid him some kind of grave insult just by existing at the same time as him.

It's been a while since Jack has seen any other version of him, he realizes. Even before they’d sent him to the BSHCI. The mania that had started to eat Will from the inside and spit out delusions for him to chase had chewed up any semblance of the respect that Graham once had for him.

He wonders if this will bring it back. If this will bring Will back – the all-star profiler who could see the greater good and didn’t mind stepping onto the chopping block if it meant saving lives. If they can come together on this, then maybe Alana’s death could mean something other than senseless tragedy.

He almost opens his mouth to say so. To get ahead of himself and start grasping for the ghost of who Will used to be but thinks better of it.

“How did things go with Abigail?” He asks, instead.

“Hannibal said he talked to you about it already.”

Just keep smiling, Jack. “He did. But I’d like your opinion as well. You see things that other people don’t. You always have. And I know that you’ve formed a special connection with her. Did going back to the house spark anything in her at all?”

“…She got to say goodbye.”

Will’s teeth scrape over his bottom lip. Jack watches them redden under the pressure, raw flesh becoming exposed as dead skin is torn away.

“To her mother. To her home. To her life as it was. It didn’t give her the answers that you want to her to have. The walls didn’t open up and tell her why her father killed little girls who looked just like her, Jack. Whatever you want to hear, it didn’t happen.”

“I know we’ve had some differences of opinion where Abigail Hobbs is concerned, Will. No one likes meeting the face of the devil’s advocate. But I wouldn’t be where I am, now, if I didn’t look where others don’t want to. Just like you wouldn’t be where you are now if you didn’t feel what others can’t. I’ve always respected your gift and the way you think. I’m hoping, in time, you’ll come to at least appreciate mine.”

Graham coughs out a noise that sounds suspiciously like a scoff, wetting his lips with his tongue now and opening his mouth with clear intent to snap back at Jack, but the sound of a door opening and then clicking closed stops him and both of them turn their heads in unison to see Dr. Lecter emerge from the bedroom.

It's… the most indecent that Jack has ever seen the doctor in his life. Dressed in only a pair of silk pajama pants and hair in *flawless* disarray. No suits, no polished shoes, no perfectly combed hair or artfully tied tie knot.

He looks damn near approachable. Not quite as icy as he is when he’s done up as a professional. And yet, part of Jack still wants to recoil; some small part of his brain cowing like it would if he was faced with an irate Bella or one of his bosses. Hiding from real consequences, even if he can’t for the life of him figure out why.

“Ah, Dr. Lecter.” Jack’s greeting is late and wavering, but at least he manages to get the words out. “I’m so sorry for the early wake up call, but time is an unfortunate factor in this line of work.”

“Not at all.” Hannibal’s voice is rougher than Jack’s ever heard it. Gravelly, like he’s got a sore throat. But his face doesn’t reflect any pain. “I understand completely. Forgive me, I wouldn’t normally greet a guest in such a manner… but it was a long night. Might I offer you some tea?”

“No. No, thank you. Really, I… well, this isn’t a social call. If I could just speak to you and Will for a moment?”

Gentle confusion draws Hannibal’s lips into a frown, but he acquiesces with a nod and crosses the room to sit next to Will.

“Has something happened?” Hannibal asks, his eyes intent on Jack’s face. Searching for any hint as to what this conversation is going to be about. “Abigail – is she harmed?"

“No!” Jack reassures him hastily, raising both of his hands to wave him down. “No, not at all. Abigail is safe and sound, just as I’m sure you left her. But something has happened. There’s never an easy way to say something like this, so I will just come right out with it. Alana Bloom was found dead this morning.”

“My god.” Horror crosses Hannibal’s face, followed quickly by sorrow. “What happened?”

“She was murdered.” Jack’s eyes shift from Hannibal’s face to Will’s. While the doctor seems horrified, Will’s expression hasn’t changed at all. He stays still and quiet, continuing to stare at that point beyond Jack. “And left to hang in Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ cabin, impaled on a rack of antlers. An investigation has already been started. Katz, Price, and Zeller are going over the evidence as we speak and her next of kin has been notified.”

Hannibal turns away from Jack, but not before he can see a single tear rolling down the doctor’s cheek and the part of Jack that had been so…anticipatory of this moment is mollified as he remembers that it’s not only Graham who would be moved by this news, but Lecter himself. He had taught Alana; had been a friend to her for longer than Jack had known either of them.

But Jack’s never been good at offering any genuine comfort to anyone but Bella. Whatever softness was left in him had belonged to his wife for a long time now. So, he simply keeps speaking.

“Obviously, Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn’t come back from the grave to commit this murder.” Jack says, squaring his shoulders as he gets to business. “Our local department is already tossing around the idea of a copycat killer, riding Hobbs’ coattails while there’s enough buzz to hide in. But I have a suspicion that what we’re dealing with isn’t just a copycat. Our killer, whoever they are, clearly knew the area well enough to display Alana’s body without being seen by any local law enforcement and knew enough about Hobbs’ work to emulate it.”

“You suspect this was done by an accomplice of his?” Lecter turns to look back at Jack. There are tear tracks on his face, still, but they’ve seemed to stop falling. “The unknown person who had been assisting him with his kills before?”

“Yes. Someone who wasn’t nearly as proficient or as gentle as he was. Elise Nichols body was in near perfect condition when she was found. Alana suffered multiple stab wounds to the chest and neck. Whoever killed her certainly didn’t love or honour her.”

Lecter closes his eyes against that information, distress pinching his expression. But when Jack looks at Will… there’s still nothing there. No horror. No anguish. No lights on at all in Will Graham’s house. He looks as empty as the day he did when they booked and processed him.

“Graham?” Jack leans forward, trying to draw his attention back from whatever far away place in his mind that he’s retreated to in order to hide from this. “Will… I know that you and I have had our differences lately. But I also know that you and Alana had just begun to repair your relationship. And I am very sorry for your loss. Despite everything that happened, I know that you two had a lot of love for each other and that -”

“I’m going to be sick.” Will mutters, suddenly, bolting upright off the couch and racing to the kitchenette.

Jack twists his head, following his movements, and watches as Will bends over the sink and seems ready to throw up into it, shoulders bouncing as he heaves.

Lecter rises with a lot more grace, following quickly after Will. He presses his hand to Will's back and rubs soothingly, whispering something too quiet for Jack to hear. Likely a stream of soothing nothings.

Being the only one still sitting feels painfully awkward, so Jack stands and slinks toward the kitchen.

"I am really sorry," he says, again, as he approaches. Now's the time, if ever it will be, to take the plunge and try to get the hook into Graham's mouth that will drag him back onto the team and back to doing what he does best. "Of everyone on the team, I know you were always the closest with her. I had even held out hope that the two of you would... get back to..."

Jack trails off slowly as Dr. Lecter draws Will into his arms and *kisses* him. First on the top of his head but then on his mouth.

"It's alright," Jack can actually hear what he's saying to soothe Will this time. "It's going to be alright, Love. I promise you."

Will only leans into Hannibal, concealing his face against his shoulder while the doctor offers Jack a slight smile that doesn't quite match the soft sadness in his eyes.

"Yes, the loss of such a close friend is unimaginably difficult. Even with the circumstances between them being what they are. You'll have to forgive me, Agent Crawford, but I wonder if we can't have some privacy? Will is clearly distressed and discussing details of this new case is sure to only upset him further."

"I…"

Jack blinks slowly, dragging his eyelids over his eyes with the half-hearted hope that he can somehow erase the image of Lecter *kissing* Graham. Take it back out of existence – refuse it as having been reality.

Or, at the very least, make it be a European thing.

"I wish that I could," Jack says, his voice sounding a little strangled even to his own ears. "As much as I would like to give us all time to grieve and fully come to terms with this loss, the fact is that time is still against us. We simply don't have time to mourn her, not when her killer is still out there."

"I understand," Hannibal nods. He's stroking his fingers through Will's hair now. Jack can't help but what every movement and feels an eye spasm that just might be a twitch. "But Will no longer works with the BAU, so I'm not certain how much help we can be."

"Will's resignation is a given," Jack agrees, hastily, feeling that spasm again. "But these are extraordinary circumstances, Dr. Lecter. One of our own has been killed and someone that Will was incredibly close to. This has become personal. I'm sure that you both can agree that now, more than ever, we need a mind like Graham's in order to bring her the justice that she deserves."

Hannibal is still petting Will's hair.

And Jack has never been a bigoted man. Hell, he hand-picked his team. Beverly, Jimmy, Brian… they're damn good workers and fine people. They get the job done and who they go home to is their own damn business.

But this is intolerable. Unacceptable. Because Will's supposed love for Alana – that crush on her that Dr. Bloom always insisted was there – that was what was going to bring him back into this. There's no man worth the blood that runs through his veins that wouldn't step up and avenge the woman that they love. Will Graham isn't an exception.

Unless he doesn't love her.

Unless he's entangled with Hannibal Lecter. The ex-surgeon, the psychiatrist, the artist, and the socialite who can take care of anything and everything that Graham could possibly want or think to ask for. If there's no love and there's no need, then there's no Graham on this case.

And if Graham is on this case, then he's really and truly fucked. Standing there with a dead killer, a teenage girl he can't prove was ever involved with the murders, a member of his own team having been slaughtered, and no answers to give anyone. Not his team, not the media, not one of his bosses.

He might as well be standing at his own grave. Forget Bloom, he's the one who's dead if he can't start pulling strings and getting results immediately.

"Graham, if you could just come look at the body or the evidence. Then we could really…"

His phone is ringing.

It takes everything in him not to swear as he fishes it out of his pocket, swiping the green icon to the right and bringing it up to his ear.

"What?"

"Hello to you too," Katz says, but her voice is flat and devoid of any of its usual humour. "You said to call you when we had something to go off of. Well, ring-ring-ring."

Jack turns away from Will and Hannibal, facing the opposite direction as if it would somehow give him more privacy.

"What do you got?"

"More than nothing, but less than something." There's some rustling and then an echo, letting Jack know that he's been put on speaker. "Did a full workup of Al – the body."

Katz voice shakes as she avoids using Alana's name. Attempting to distance herself from the tragedy she's staring down.

"The killer didn't leave any physical evidence. No fingerprints in the bruising, no DNA under her nails but her own and she must have been scratching if she was able. Her nails look rough

and chipped like she was scrambling for her life, so we're looking at someone smart enough to scrape underneath and get rid of their skin cells. Zeller went over the video cameras at the motel. They're not exactly high quality, but she was last seen getting dropped off at the motel by Hannibal and Will. Can't see her face, but I recognize her coat. She climbs out, waves goodbye, then goes straight to her own Sedan. Sits there until Hannibal and Will leave, and then pulls out of frame."

"Going where?"

"She didn't exactly leave a family circus dotted path to follow, Jack. But they found her car in the woods near the cabin, haphazardly covered with brush. The backseat of her car is drenched in her blood and her clothes were there. They brought them to me."

"Jesus." Jack rubs at his eyes with his free hand. "Don't drag this out, Katz. Tell me whatever it is that you don't want to tell me."

"I checked Tattlecrime."

"…And?" Jack asks, not getting it.

"Well, there are no pictures. No new article detailing this gruesome death. No quotes from police. Nothing has been posted."

"So?"

"So, I pulled three long, red curly hairs from Alana's coat." Beverly's voice is flat. "Agent Bennet insisted on having his team comb over the sedan since we're getting body and textiles, but I'd bet my degree that they're going to find more of Freddie Lounds' DNA in there. And if she doesn't have photos of this crime scene…"

"Then maybe it's because this is evidence that she'd rather the public not see." Jack finishes, his blood running cold in his veins. "Keep looking. I want updates to the minute."

"Got it."

Jack hangs up without saying goodbye, turning on his heel to face down Graham and Lecter.

"Tell me Freddie Lounds was lurking around the Hobbs' house when you brought Abigail to do her walk through."

It's not a demand so much as it is a plea. The spot where he's standing suddenly feels very fragile, like the world will give away any minute and swallow him whole.

"No." Hannibal says, looking perplexed. "There was no one there but us."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. And another fuck thrown in for good measure. Panic is starting to set in, sending his nerves into a frenzy. If Lounds was there, then she would have gone up to them. Would have begged for the chance to interview Abigail, would have snapped

pictures of her coming home and written up a snappy article about the Shrike's daughter returning to the nest or *something*.

But if there's nothing…

"Katz just told me that we have footage of Bloom getting out of your car and getting into her own." Jack shoves his phone back into his pocket, trying not to think about the article out there that Freddie did write – the article that he basically put his name on when he outlined it for her. "Did she tell you where she was going?"

"She said she was meeting with someone after we were done at Abigail's home. I had assumed it would be one of your agents."

"…Well, I'd suggest that you and Graham get dressed," Jack says, fingers twitching. Why would Bloom be meeting with Freddie? Had she suspected that Jack had collaborated with her on that article? Or was there something else going on ? "You, Graham, and Abigail were the last people to see her alive. Which means you have lots of questions to answer at the station."

(***)

"Now, Dr. Graham… this is just a formality. I know it, you know it. You're not in any real trouble here. We just want to talk to you, get a few things on the record, and you'll be outta here in time for lunch. Sound good to you?"

"Is this your first time conducting an interview?" Will asks tonelessly, drumming his fingers against the drab, grey table that acts as the centerpiece in every secure interview room. "Because, if it is, then this is a teaching opportunity. And, if it's not, then you really need a refresher course."

"I'm sorry?"

Bennet cants his head to the side like a confused dog, with none of the charm of a tail wag and Will watches his posture deflate with clinical disinterest. He has a lot riding on this, Will knows. He can see it in Bennet's expression.

This is his shot at redemption; a chance to undo some grievous error that's about to become a glaring dark spot on an otherwise spotless record. He can't avoid any more screw ups, not even a standard interview and especially not while whoever lords over him might be watching. Being corrected already by Will, and so soon into things, is basically a proverbial gesture of tying the agent's shoelaces together. He doesn't' stand a chance on staying upright on his own two feet. How the hell did this guy graduate?

And why the hell is the fact that he did manage to scrape up a degree suddenly Will's problem? Why is he here, separated from Hannibal, when he could still be back at the hotel.

Eating liver on toast - a surprisingly good meal, despite how bizarre it sounded - and letting Hannibal shape reality around them into whatever form that he wanted to see from it. He didn't have to be dealing with any of this, least of all a rookie agent who couldn't find the glaringly obvious mistakes in his work.

“Two mistakes. First, you told me that I’m not in any trouble. That’s not true. Everyone is a suspect until they’ve been ruled otherwise. It’s guilty until proven innocent in these situations, especially since I was one of the last three people who saw Alana Bloom alive. If I had a lawyer present, they can take that as an on-the-record admission that you are not pressing any charges and they would haul me out of here before you could move onto your next bullet point.” Will reaches across the table and taps his index finger against the manila folder that’s sitting in front of Bennet, knowing instinctively that there’s a cheat sheet on the inside to help him keep on track. “Number two, you made a guarantee about what time I would be out of here. Any good agent would know that, while attempting to establish a sense of comradery, you only hint at possibilities of good will. ‘I’ll try to have you out of here by lunch’, Agent Bennet. Not “you will be out of here by lunch”. This is all on the record and you have to be very careful with what you say if you’re going to catch a killer.”

“It was my understanding that you were never an official agent, Dr. Graham.” Bennet smiles widely, but it doesn’t detract from the irritation in his eyes. “You must really have had a lot of field experience while working as a special consultant. I think I’ve had instructors who made less sense than you did. You have a gift.”

“I did get a lot of experience in the field. But I was also a professor. And in addition to being a professor, I’m a damned good profiler. Flattery isn’t going to work on me. Let’s just skip all that and get to the point, please. I lost my taste for these procedures a while ago.”

“I would guess that’s true, considering the five months you spent behind bars as the suspected Chesapeake Ripper.” Bennet’s smile fades, but he keeps his faux kindness in his tone. “It must just be nice to be answering questions without the handcuffs. I’m sorry that our system failed you as it did, and I’ll do my best to make quick work of the rest of this.”

Will impulsively scratches at his wrist, scraping his nails over skin that would have been covered by metal cuffs that bit so hard into his flesh that he’d have bruises that would never seem to fully heal. Bennet won’t shake off his good cop persona, not even to fully commit to an insult, but it’s a palpable hit, nonetheless.

Bennet flips open his folder. There’s the cheat sheet and it’s almost a salve on Will’s scabbed over wounds. “Can you state your name for the record?”

“Will Graham.”

“Great. And, for the record, are you speaking to me voluntarily? Of your own free will and volition?”

Someone’s opened a thesaurus. “Yes.”

“Great. Thanks, Will.” Bennet straightens his shoulders and scrunches up his face into an amalgamation of what must be a borrowed expression from someone he respects; someone

he models himself after. “Early this morning, around six forty-five a.m., Dr. Alana Bloom was found dead with her body displayed in the cabin of the late Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Agent Crawford spoke with you a little about this already, right?”

Don’t think about the blood. Don’t think about the screaming.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I really don’t want to take up too much of your time, despite what my lack of experience in interviews might be telling you, so I won’t go over the details of Dr. Bloom’s death. But, as you said before, you are one of three people who were the last known people to have seen her alive and we’re looking into her death, so I’m going to ask you a few questions about some of the things that we’ve found and ask you about your whereabouts. Is that all right?”

Will scratches at the inside of his wrist again, trying not to notice just how hot the lights seem to be when they burn down on him like this.

This is what real guilt feels like.

“That’s fine.”

“Good. So, why don’t we start by me asking you where you were around eight last night?”

“I don’t know.”

Bennet falters. “Sorry?”

“I don’t know if I was still in the car or at the hotel.” Will licks his lips, trying to wet them so it feels less like they’re splitting when he speaks. “I uh, fell asleep after we left the Hobbs place and I don’t know around what time.”

“Okay, that’s fine. Could someone else account for your whereabouts?”

“Yes, Dr. Lecter could. And Abigail, I guess.”

“That would be Abigail Hobbs?” Bennet scribbles something down onto his cheat sheet. Just chicken scratch, Will would say if he had to guess. Just a little scribble of pencil to paper to make Will feels as though Bennet is paying close attention.

“Yes. I am on record as having taken Abigail back to her family home in order to attempt to stir up some memories of what happened the morning that her father attempted to murder her. Agent Crawford not only suggested but approved the trip.”

“Of course, of course. But, if I asked either Miss Hobbs or Dr. Lecter, they would both be able to say where you were? And their answers would match?”

“I assume so.”

How much does Abigail know? Is she here, now, being questioned too? Will didn't get the chance to ask – he was separated from Hannibal immediately after they'd shown up here. Abigail had seen… Abigail hadn't seen?

She saw if Will killed Alana.

She didn't see if Will didn't kill Alana.

Two versions of reality sit in his head. One painted in the blood of his actions, the other in the black and white lines of Hannibal's design. And Will bites the tip of his tongue, trying to find something soothing in the pain that grounds him and to remember what it was that Hannibal had whispered to him when he was dry heaving over the sink.

(Our words are our reality, Mylimasis. Let mine be the one you live.)

"Well, then there's great." More chicken scratch against the paper. "How did it go? Taking Ms. Hobbs back home, I mean?"

"Is that relevant to this?" Will asks, hoarsely.

"Oh, I'm not asking for a play-by-play of the whole visit, Dr. Graham. If you could just sum it up in a word or two? Good, bad, difficult? It must have been an emotionally charged event, bringing Abigail back to the home where she was nearly murdered. And the place where you were forced to gun down Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Tensions were probably running high?"

"It was hard for her. We didn't get the answers that both she and Agent Crawford want. So, it's hard to say if she'll be getting any closure. I'm not a psychiatrist, though, you'd need to talk to a professional about the impact the visit had on her. I'm just a profiler."

"You do hold a doctorate in psychology, don't you?"

"Criminal psychology. A study of patterns in human behaviours that can explain why people do the things that they do."

She could have just walked away. She could have walked out with them. Could be here, now, if she just agreed not to run to Jack. If she just wasn't so intent on ruining another life… I had to kill her.

(You didn't kill her.)

"Right. Of course." Bennet's smile doesn't slip, but Will wishes it would. He's getting tired of seeing it. "So, things were normal? As normal as they could be in a situation like that?"

"We were unsuccessful in any way that mattered to either Abigail or Jack. So, we were all tired and disappointed. I would say that's normal for the situation."

"And Dr. Bloom? You would say that she was equally tired and disappointed?"

"Among other things. She didn't want to take Abigail back to her home from the beginning. She didn't think that she was ready to face it, yet. And she was partly right. There was no

catharsis in revisiting it."

"Did she express any of these frustrations to you or are you merely extrapolating? With that uh, interesting little thing you can do?"

"She told me that we shouldn't have brought her back. She told Jack that we shouldn't take her. She told Hannibal that we shouldn't take her. Alana was a lot of things, but never someone who suffered in silence. If she had a problem with something, you knew. Because she would tell you. I don't need to be overly empathic to know."

("I can't just pretend not to see evil like you can. And you know what the right thing to do is just as much as I do.")

"I didn't mean to be offensive, Dr. Graham. I only just recently read up on you and what it is that you did for the FBI, so I guess I'm still looking at it from the clinical angle of research. Forgive me."

Will nods stiffly. Partly because people looking at him like he's a sample in a petri dish isn't exactly a new or astonishing sensation but also because Alana's voice is still echoing in his head.

"In doing that research, I did learn that Alana Bloom was the one who originally pointed to you as being a killer – and possibly even the Chesapeake Ripper. That must have been a huge shock and betrayal to you, to have your co-workers turn on you like that. How were things between you? Strained, I imagine?"

(*All she had to do was look the other way. All she had to do was care about someone's life more than her own self-righteous bullshit. If she had just done that, then he never would have had to kill her.)*

"We found common ground in caring about what happens to Abigail. That was enough for us to work together on this last case before I permanently removed myself from work with the BAU and the FBI at large."

"And did she say anything to you about what she may have been planning to do once the trip back home was finished for Abigail?"

(*I don't like this anymore than you do, but we have to tell Jack. He needs to know. This needs to be dealt with.)*

She was going to ruin Abigail's life. Throw her away like she was nothing – the same way she did to him. He had to stop her. There was no other choice. She never would have let it go on her own. She would never stop unless she was stopped. Killing her was the only way.

(Our words are our reality, Mylimasis. Let mine be the one you live.)

Understanding doesn't dawn inside of Will so much as it falls, clicking into place as if he'd known from the very beginning. Calm suffuses through him, and he stops tapping his fingers against his wrist, letting his limbs grow slack.

He didn’t kill Alana.

He didn’t kill her, because saying otherwise, even to himself, is as damning as an admission of guilt to Bennet here and now. He didn’t kill Alana because if he lets himself acknowledge any other truth, then he might stumble. He might trip. He might give himself up and away through something as simple and easy as every rookie mistake that Bennet was making in this interview.

But if he didn’t kill Alana, then there’s nothing to trip over.

“I just assumed she’d do the usual things.” Will says, shaking his head. The words come easily, as if Hannibal were there with him now, whispering them into his ear for him to repeat. “You know, write up a report about Abigail. Get some take out, maybe yell at Jack for pushing us to do something that wasn’t what was best for Abigail. We weren’t back to the point of sharing our plans. So, all I had was assumptions. She wasn’t volunteering information to me, and I wasn’t asking. She probably told Hannibal, though. They were on better terms than she and I were."

The sound of the door to the interview room opening cuts Bennet off before he can rattle off his next question and they both turn their heads as Jack enters the room halfway, holding the door open and gazing inside with a thunderous expression.

“Graham.” He barks out at him. “This interview is over.”

“What?” Bennet starts to stand. “No, it isn’t. I still have more questions for him.”

“This interview is over.” Jack says, again, his voice as hard as his expression. “Abigail needs you, Graham. She’s asking for you right now. You are ending this interview on the grounds that you would like legal representation before we ask you anything further.”

“Legal representation?” Bennet sputters, slapping his folder down against the table. “Goddammit, Crawford! Who the hell do you think you are? Do you really think that you can just play fast and loose with the regulations around here just because of your title in the BAU? You’re not the only one who can file reports and I’ve got half a department here that wants to see your ass burn for all the hell you’ve been putting us through since you got here. Now, step back outside before I – Dr. Graham, where are you going?”

Will’s halfway to the door before Bennet seems to realize that he’s screaming for a lost cause and he doesn’t so much as look back over his shoulder when he answers the agent.

“You heard him. This interview is over until I have legal representation. Call my lawyer if you want to talk.”

And then he’s out the door and racing down the hall, his heart hammering in his chest so loudly that he can’t hear the explanation that Jack offers if he gives one, just hurrying in the direction that he hopes will lead him to his kid.

Chapter End Notes

Guys if you've made it to this chapter in the story, then you've already seen the major character death and you can relax now I promise. Also I just want to remind everyone that Hannibal literally cut into Will's head with the intention to eat his brain. Just in case we still have questions about the level of unhealthiness that this relationship can have as compared to what I've actually written.

Kthxbai!!!!

Edit One: Guys, dry heaving isn't actually throwing up. It's when your body does all the muscle movement involved with throwing up, but nothing actually comes up or out. It's painful, but doesn't ruin kissing. Kthxbai again

Chapter 36

"Then, there is only the third option." Dr. Lecter reaches out and taps his index finger against the outside of the bag. It shifts and catches the light and Abigail realizes that it's not empty. She can see it, now. A few long, red hairs. "We place the blame elsewhere. And onto someone who deserves a little suffering."

"The woman who broke into my room?"

"Freddie Lounds." Dr. Lecter nods and withdraws his hand, leaving Abigail holding the baggie. "The so-called journalist, yes."

"Why her?" Abigail looks up from the bag of hair in her hand, forehead pinched with confusion. Everything about Freddie feels blurred in her memory. An abstract image of vibrant red hair, bleached-white teeth, and a soft voice. "What did she do?"

***To deserve this,** is the unspoken part of that question. What was the offense grievous enough that Dr. Lecter was this happy to take away her life and freedom in exchange for Will and Abigail's? If he was so calm about murder, so relaxed about body disposal, and so careless about making house calls then what kind of person could Freddie Lounds be that she managed to upset HIS sensibilities?*

"She's a woman of falsehoods. She sells lies and profits on the misery of others." A pause, then – "And yours was not the first hospital room that she had broken into."

Okay, so she's a serial peeping tom and an average blogger. Looking down at the baggie of hair, again, Abigail frowns. Are those good enough reasons for her to spend the rest of her life in prison?

...What is a good enough reason to take someone's freedom away?

*'**What's a good enough reason to take their life?'** a voice in the back of her mind hisses. Guilt is a living, breathing thing inside of her and it's all too happy to chime in now, fusing with self-preservation. **'Theirs for yours? What's one more life ruined by you?'***

"What do you want me to do with this?" Abigail swallows hard against the bile that rises in the back of her throat at the thought of dead girls wearing her nightgowns. Blood runs red and stains white fabric. "Sprinkle it on the body?"

"No," Dr. Lecter says, shortly. "I would like you to place the contents of that bag into the pillow that you destroyed, alongside the rest of the hair. I will take care of what evidence needs to be found on the body."

"...Do you carry a lot of bags of hair on you?" She can't resist asking – some things that Dr. Lecter does are stranger than others. "Do you have some of mine?"

“You would be surprised how many people are careless with their DNA. Just as surprised as you might be to find how often a situation might call for improvisation.” That’s a yes to both of her questions, Abigail assumes. “If you would take care of that task? I’m afraid our conversation has gone on too long… that will be Will, coming to join us.”

An expression of disquiet disrupts the unusual serenity on Dr. Lecter’s face and Abigail watches with equal parts curiosity and fear as the doctor goes for his briefcase and brings out something else.

A needle?

Abigail flinches, suddenly sure that he’s going to ***stab*** *her. But before she can think to reel back or defend herself, she hears Will’s voice.*

“Hannibal?”

“Here, Mylimasis.” Dr. Lecter turns to the doorway just as Will steps partially into view and, as quick as the strike of a snake, sticks him in he neck with the needle and presses down on the plunger.

Will makes a strangled sound and Abigail yelps with astonishment, dropping the baggie of hair and clapping her hands over her mouth, suddenly sure that she’s just seen Dr. Lecter ***kill*** *him.*

“…Ow.”

Will’s complaint is almost whisper soft as Dr. Lecter withdraws the needle and Abigail watches with horror as Will lifts his hand to touch the spot where he was just stabbed, eyes growing hazy.

“I apologize, darling.” Dr. Lecter gathers Will into his arms, holding him as gently as her own father used to hold her mother. “But I simply can’t offer you the support that you need and clean up the house. Rest, now, and everything will be alright again when you wake.”

*“****Ow.****” Will slurs out the protest again, but this time it sounds like an accusation even as his eyes flutter and his body goes lax, overpowered by whatever Dr. Lecter had in that needle.*

“It didn’t hurt, you’re only annoyed.” Dr. Lecter’s eyes shift to Abigail’s face, leaving her to assume that was equal parts to console her as it was to comfort Will. “It was only a mild sedative, Abigail. It won’t hurt him; just help him sleep for a bit.”

“Why did you do that to him?” Swallowing hard, Abigail scoops the baggie of hair back up off the floor. “I thought you liked Agent Graham.”

For the first time since Abigail’s met Dr. Lecter, he looks surprised.

“What an exiguous demarcation of my feelings.”

Abigail can only assume from the look on his face that “exiguous demarcation” must be a fancy way of saying “understatement”.

“You stabbed him.”

“I sedated him.” Hannibal scoops Will up into his arms for the second time, this time carrying him to couch and setting him down gently onto it. “For his own good and for ours. This is not his becoming. He killed for you, not himself. For all the grievances he had against Alana, he would not have been moved to end her life if she had never posed a threat to you.”

“My father killed for me.” Abigail doesn’t know if she’s arguing, agreeing, or just stating the obvious when she says that. It just strikes a chord in her, to know that she’s now got a kill count for two different people. “It doesn’t make a real difference, does it? Why you kill?”

“Your father was fighting the inevitable. Every life he took was to buy you more time. And, in doing so, he was chained by conventions. He never became more than what he was.” Dr. Lecter brushes a curl from Will’s face. “He refused to create a legacy for himself and refused to create one for you. Instead, he put you both in purgatory.”

“Why do you talk about him like that?” a surge of irrational anger sparks through her. Her father was a monster – she’s a monster. She knows that. But there’s still some part of her that wants to defend him. “You’re just like him, aren’t you? A murderer. There’s not really a gold, silver, and bronze ranking for killing is there?”

“I am nothing like your father, Abigail.” The expression on Dr. Lecter’s face makes it clear that there is no worse thing she could accuse him of, but his voice is still surprisingly gentle. “And neither is Will. Your father is what happens when we deny the truths of our nature. When you suppress your talents, they rot inside of you and spill out in unpredictable and often very ugly ways.”

Abigail knows the answer but still asks the question. “You think he should have killed me.”

“I think that he tried and yet here you are. Alive. Elevated beyond him.” There’s almost… pride in Dr. Lecter’s voice. “You are no more like your father than I am. You, like Will, are capable of so much more. And I can help you both achieve it. It’s your luck that you’re further into your own becoming than he is. The benefits of being encouraged to pursue your passions at a young age cannot be spoke of highly enough. This adventure is yours and mine, for the time being.”

“I have a feeling that time might be running out.”

Dr. Lecter smiles. “Then I suggest you get to work while you still can, Abigail.”

*

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The horror of this situation didn't really start to sink in until the moment the door opened, and Will came through it with eyes wide like he was expecting to witness a massacre in motion. Abigail's seen that look before, that instinctive panic, but it was in her father's eyes. Almost too many years ago for her to count back to, when she'd misjudged the gap between the play structure and the metal bar she meant to slide down. She'd looked for her father instinctively as that horrible sensation of *falling* gripped her. It was the first time she'd ever seen her father look afraid – the first time she ever realized just how much of a superhero he was, when her body never actually hit the ground but was tucked safely into his arms instead when he ran and caught her.

Who's going to catch her now? End this sickening free fall and quiet the storm of anxiety that makes her stomach churn?

Dr. Lecter's hand squeezes her shoulder. A gesture of comfort and a warning to remember herself.

Abigail smooths her expression clean of any feeling; imagines herself wiping a knife across her feelings with the same efficient hand that her father had when he skinned a deer and tries to ignore the echo of the feeling that came when she'd stepped off a ledge without knowing what was waiting for her at the bottom.

"Alright, I've got Will." Agent Crawford's voice enters the room before he does, but he's not far behind his words and Abigail drops her gaze down to her hands, inspecting the uneven lengths of her bitten down nails and tries to appear as cowed. "Here he is. Now, will someone please tell me what's going on and why the hell it's so important that it can't wait until we've finished clearing your names of any involvement with what happened to Alana?"

Abigail looks anywhere but at Will when she hears Dr. Bloom's name. Old habits die hard; she used to look up at the ceiling or at the wall opposite her parents whenever Mom asked them how the tour of campus had gone or if they'd gotten anything good while hunting. Would look anywhere but at her father, terrified that her mother would see something in her expression that would give them away.

"Hannibal?"

Abigail hears Will address Dr. Lecter. She still doesn't look at him, but there's a hard note of mistrust in his voice; a quiet accusation hiding in the shadow of the question he's asking. And Abigail brings her hand up to her mouth, again, scraping the blunt edge of her teeth under her nail and nibbles at the shreds left of the distal edges.

How much does he remember? Could it really be none of it, like Hannibal had assured her of while they went over her story, over and over again, on the long drive to her father's cabin?

"I'm sorry to have worried you," Dr. Lecter says to Will, his voice soft. "Abigail is fine. Taking her back to her family home seems to have caused her to have a revelation after all."

Agent Crawford's nostrils flare, perking up like a dog hearing a bag of treats being shaken back and forth and she's surprised he doesn't *lunge* at her.

“A revelation? About what? What do you know?” Agent Crawford takes a step toward her, eyes intent on her face. “Is it about your father? The victims? Tell me.”

“Agent Crawford, I won’t have you pestering my client.” Hannibal’s lawyer speaks up from his place in the corner. He’d retreated there to get as far away from Hannibal as possible and hadn’t said much since but seems to remember himself now that Will’s there and the show is back in motion. “Abigail is here of her own volition and will not be subject to any hostility.”

“With all due respect, we are talking about a murder case. Withholding any information is an obstruction of justice.”

“Ow!”

Will suddenly winces and Abigail looks up in alarm, half-expecting to see another needle sticking out of his neck. But Dr. Lecter looks just as surprised and concerned as she feels and there’s no needle. Just Will, standing there and rubbing his shoulder.

“…Sorry,” he says, slowly lowering his hand without looking away from Agent Crawford. “Sometimes my shoulder twinges where I got shot. Carry on, Jack. What were you saying about justice?”

They share a look that Abigail doesn’t have the context for. But whatever it is in Will’s gaze, it seems to cow Agent Crawford enough that he takes a step back.

“…Alright,” he says, slowly. Clearly trying to keep his anger from getting the best of him. “Tell us, Abigail, in your own time. You came here for a reason. What is that reason?”

Can she do this?

Abigail isn’t sure. Despite how confident Dr. Lecter had been in his assurances that they’d get through this unscathed… despite how calm Will seemed to be, now that he was there with them… and despite the way that her father’s voice is echoing in her head, bidding her to lie as easily as she always did…

She doesn’t feel anything but scared. Scared like she’s always been, ever since she was a little kid and her father came to her room to show her his new knife.

“…I don’t want to do this,” Abigail whispers, giving in and letting that fear bleed into her voice. She can feel Dr. Lecter’s hand tightening on her shoulder and tilts her head back to look up at him, an apology written all over her face. “I’m sorry, I can’t. They couldn’t even keep her out of my closely guarded hospital room. How are they supposed to protect me after this?”

There is no understanding in Dr. Lecter’s expression, but there’s no confusion either. His answer comes immediately, without any hesitation. “Perhaps they won’t be able to, but it hardly matters. You’ll have me. And you’ll have Will. No one will get past us.”

“Who won’t get past you?” Agent Crawford grinds out.

Abigail squares her shoulders and exhales. In her mind's eye, she imagines what'll happen if she slips up. What Dr. Lecter will do to everyone in the room if she suddenly confesses what really happened to Dr. Bloom the night before. She imagines her throat, cut once again. Blood dripping down under the collar of her shirt, staining her skin and making her so hot and so cold all at once.

She lets herself feel terror. It pools on the tip of her tongue, tasting of hysteria… and then she speaks. "I lied, before, when I said that I didn't know who the woman who broke into my hospital room was. I mean, I didn't know her face. She was a stranger to me at first. But I recognized her voice."

Will makes a soft sound of disquiet, understanding finding him faster than it does anyone else and Abigail steals a glance at him. He has the expression of someone trying to do complicated equations in their head but the set of his mouth, the frown there, tells her that he has a better idea of what's going on than he's letting on and she turns back to Agent Crawford.

"She was the woman who called our house that morning." Abigail finishes, crossing her arms over her chest and slumping down in her chair. Trying to look smaller. More vulnerable. "She asked to talk to my dad. I just assumed that it was someone from one of the places he worked. Receptionists used to call our house all the time and I knew that he wasn't staying on the same site for that much longer. I didn't really think anything of it until…"

She shifts her hand to her throat, brushing her fingers against the scar there.

"Are you saying Freddie Lounds was your father's accomplice?" Agent Crawford asks. His face is gaunt and ashen, shoulders slumped under the weight of this revelation.

"I'm saying that she called my house the morning that my dad tried to kill me and then broke into my hospital room the morning I woke up."

Dad would be proud of her now, Abigail thinks, as she watches shock spread across Agent Crawford's face. The apple is sitting at the base of the tree and ready to rot.

(***)

What a clever girl.

Hannibal couldn't possibly be prouder of Abigail than he is in this moment, as he watches her think on her feet and weave her fear into an intricate web of lies that practically drips with sincerity. Even knowing the truth, he can find practically no fault with her rendition of events. Some techncial issues in her body language, perhaps a touch of overacting…

But it's done well enough for this crowd, here.

“Why didn’t you say this before?” Jack’s eyes have become almost comically wide, horror swirling in their depths in an almost outlandish display.

Hannibal’s gaze shifts to his lawyer. He frowns subtly and nods his head, sending him forward. And he goes on quick feet, ready to sink his teeth into the legal aspects now that the psychological warfare seems to be over.

“Did you not hear my client?” Mr. Connery asks, drawing himself to his fullest height. “Freddie Lounds was able to get into Miss Hobbs’ guarded hospital room, under the very nose of the FBI. Abigail cannot be held responsible for withholding information that she felt would compromise her safety, especially after the FBI made it so very clear that her well-being was not a priority to them.”

“She can if the information she was withholding allowed a murderer to get away with another killing!” Agent Crawford turns and slams his fist down onto the desk with a thunderous crash. The impact sends a cup of pens onto the floor, scattering in all directions. “Do you have any idea what this means? Katz found what looks like Freddie Lounds’ hair on Alana’s coat. If Lounds was the one who did this… we could have had her in custody if we’d known…”

“Lounds?” Will’s voice cracks like a whip, cutting through Agent Crawford’s terrified monologue. “You found Lounds’ hair at the scene?”

Hannibal keeps his gaze trained forward on Jack, but that doesn’t mean that he takes no notice of the way that Will looks at him, then, accusation and unanswered questions burning in his gaze.

“…Yes.” Agent Crawford heaves a sigh, clearly realizing that there’s no point in keeping secrets anymore. “Yes, we did. We brought you were for questioning to see if you knew who she was going to meet. If anything pointed in that direction.”

“I would say that this is evidence enough.” Hannibal lets go of Abigail’s shoulder, motioning for her to stand as he collects her coat from where he hung it up, before, pressing it into her grasp and standing between her and Agent Crawford, acting as a buffer between them. “I would also be so emboldened to ask how it is that you still blame Abigail for what has happened when you, yourself, have had the chance to have Lounds in custody twice already. In addition to breaking into Abigail’s hospital room and violating her protective custody, did she not also enter a crime scene and obstruct justice by soiling it with her DNA? I believe that is a federal offense, is it not?”

“We were placing out manpower in other places,” Jack says, hastily. A shadow crosses his face, though. There’s a secret there. Something he desperately wants to keep hidden. “The shrike too precedent over a two-bit journalist climbing fences.”

“Well, that’s a sentiment I think a judge should hear.” Mr. Connery says, his voice dry. “I’ll be happy to present that as your argument to him when we take this to court.”

“Court?” Jack repeats, sputtering now. “That won’t be necessary, will it?”

“I intend to request temporary custody of Abigail Hobbs, citing the FBI’s repeated incompetence in handling her case. Unfortunately, Agent Crawford, that does include all that you have done to compromise her safety.” Hannibal will relish the look on Jack’s face for a long time to come. “I will be taking both her and Will back to Baltimore, in order to ensure their safety.”

“Graham.” Jack turns to Will, now, his eyes narrowed. “Is that really how it’s going to be? Alana’s body is barely cold and you’re going to walk away now? With her killer still out there?”

“You’ve got a name, Jack.” Will glances at Hannibal once before turning on his old boss and shaking his head. “More than that. You’ve got a face. You probably have her location. There are no leaps to make here. Just follow the arrows on the ground that have been placed for your convenience. How can you possibly still need my help?”

“The BAU needs you, Will.” Desperation wafts off Jack in waves, stronger than any cologne. “We just lost Alana. Don’t make us suffer through the loss of you too.”

“I’ve held my tongue for quite some time now,” Hannibal interrupts, taking Will by the hand and pulling him back away from Jack, drawing him in close. “For the sake of professionalism, for the sake of Will’s safety, yes. But I can only afford so much patience, Agent Crawford. You had Will wrongfully arrested and imprisoned without a proper trial. And it was that incarceration that led him to nearly be disemboweled by an unhinged orderly whom several of the greatest minds in psychology encountered and yet somehow never detected a thing wrong with. And now your misconduct has put Abigail’s life in danger. And instead of humility, instead of apologies, instead of any decency at all… you would use this time to attempt to manipulate Will’s sense of valor?”

“Dr. Lecter, with all due respect –“

“No.” Hannibal’s voice is much softer than Jack’s, but it commands more attention. “No, Agent Crawford. That is my answer. That is his answer. Will and I have lost a friend. And we have no time to grieve because we must do what the FBI will not and provide safety for Abigail. If you can offer any respect, then you will stand down now.”

Hannibal turns his head, then, and looks to his lawyer. “Mr. Connery, do you think you have sufficient evidence collected to ensure a restraining order?”

“Absolutely, Dr. Lecter.”

“Good. Then I would like to have one filed against Agent Crawford for Will, Abigail, and myself. Please see that it’s viewed by a judge as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Dr. Lecter.”

“We’re leaving now.” Hannibal murmurs to Abigail and Will, placing his hand on the small of Will’s back to guide him to the door and trusting that Abigail will follow suit.

“Dr. Lecter, if you walk out that door with Will Graham, then you will be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent people, if not more. The world needs Graham. Can you live with that kind of blood on your hands?”

Hannibal pauses at the door and looks over his shoulder, mouth quirking into the faintest trace of a smile.

“Will doesn’t belong to the world. He belongs to me. Good day, Agent Crawford.”

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